

Disclaimer: As I took the pains in mentioning it in Be Careful... I do not own Harry Potter

Author's notes; I would suggest that you read my earlier work of fan fiction Be Careful What You Wish For before this as it is a part of this work of fan fiction.

Warning: this chapter, in fact this entire story may contain clichés. I know that for a fact and recognise it. You'll only be pointing out the obvious when saying that in a review. Oh, and everything takes place seven years after canon. i.e. canon Harry's fifth year was in 1995-1996 but in this AU, it is in 2002-2003.

Rise of the Wizards

Chapter 1

2010

Harry Potter contemplated life as he sat in his well appointed study in his ancestral manor. He occasionally took sips from a glass of firewhiskey that he held in his hand as he stared into the fire in front of him.

Just today he had started his morning off with a confrontation with his former friend Hermione Granger. Well, 'confrontation' was a bit of an understatement; it had been more of a blazing row than anything else.

Harry supposed it was a good thing that his office doors had a silencing ward embedded into them, automatically cutting off all sound the minute the doors were closed. Had it been a muggle office, the whole floor would have been able to hear the shrieking of that harpy; that was a fact that Harry was sure of. As it was Harry's ears still rang with the sound of her voice.

Was she always this shrill, Harry thought, or did living with the Weasley matriarch along with her twit of a husband improve her shouting ability?

Harry amused himself for a bit thinking of Hermione Granger sitting with Molly Weasley in one of those acoustic rooms and practising her vocals with Molly interrupting her with tips now and then ('no no,

dear, you should modulate your A's like this ... add a bit more snap to the name there ...') before he sobered and his thoughts returned to the topic of the conversation.

The Harry Potter Magical Child Protection Act, or as he liked to call it, the HPMCPA, (he still was getting used to having his name associated with anything much less important bits of legislature) was an important part of his plans for the wizarding world.

It was a wild idea, one cooked up by two lost sixteen year old former school rivals who were really feeling the pressure of the world on their shoulders, albeit for different reasons who had decided to get drunk just once to forget. To forget the bitter rivalry they once had, the fact that they were both pawns in opposing sides of a war that was really between two bitter manipulative old men who should have died long ago, a war that was never going to really end as long as one of those aforementioned old men lived, a war that would probably end the wizarding world's existence for good.

As such neither of them ever in their wildest dreams imagined that anyone would have ever been interested in their drunken ramblings, much less that the same person would have actually formed a coherent plan from them.

Then again, considering that the same person has managed the impossible and has successfully cheated death nearly seven hundred years ago, and still continues to do so, it really shouldn't have been so surprising.

He definitely had come far in his life. He no longer was the eleven year old wide-eyed child who saw Hogwarts as a haven from his abusive relatives, nor was he the same naive fifteen year old who only saw the world in black and white and was convinced that Dumbledore was always right.

Harry remembered exactly when everything had changed for him. The precise moment when he stopped being Dumbledore's pawn and had finally seen the world for what it was and what needed to be done;

2003

Harry's scar burst open and he knew he was dead: it was pain beyond imagining, pain past endurance –

He was gone from the hall, he was locked in the coils of a creature with red eyes, so tightly bound that Harry did not know where his body ended and the creature's began: they were fused together, bound by pain, and there was no escape –

And when the creature spoke, it used Harry's mouth, so that in his agony, he felt his jaw move...

'Kill me now Dumbledore ...'

Blinded and dying, every part of him screaming for release, Harry felt the creature use him again...

'If death is nothing, Dumbledore, kill the boy ...'

Let the pain stop, thought Harry ... let him kill us ... end it, Dumbledore ... death is nothing compared to this...

And I'll see Sirius again...

And as Harry's heart filled with emotion, the creature's coils loosened, the pain was slowly lessening. Bolstered, Harry pushed ... he thought of his parents, how they had with their dying breath tried to save him, how they also had, even beyond the grave done the same thing again years later.

He thought of Sirius again; how he had offered Harry a chance to be away from the Dursleys forever, a chance for a new life, and a link to his deceased parents, and the feeling in him swelled.

At the same time, in the Department of Mysteries, unbeknownst to the remaining combatants there, a locked door suddenly glowed brightly around the edges filling the entrance chamber with an intense yet soothing light.

The creature suddenly let go of Harry as he felt an intense rush of emotion that a small part of him recognised as love. Harry then found himself in a void full of a roiling white force. In front of him was a black mass surrounded by a force of green and red.

The Dark presence, which was the soul fragment of Voldemort's that was lodged in Harry's scar, had been kept at bay by the Light Blood Ward that Lily Potter had cast on her son. However, as with all forms of powerful Old Magic (Dark or Light) this ward was powered by a powerful emotion, which in this case was love.

Unfortunately, Dumbledore had inadvertently weakened this ward when he, not fully understanding the nature of the ward, had placed Harry in a home where he was hated at worst and treated with cold indifference at best. As these emotions were the opposite of Love, the blood ward had weakened very slightly. It was enough for the soul fragment to form a magical connection with Harry

It was due to this after all that Harry could speak Parseltounge and also wield a wand that was a brother of Voldemort's.

This ward then was further weakened even further when Voldemort had used Harry's blood to regain his body. Thus the bond between the soul fragment and Harry became a bit stronger.

However in an ironic twist of fate, by using Harry's blood, Voldemort had become a sort of Horcrux of Harry's.

When being possessed by Voldemort, the blood ward had temporarily fallen as, unbeknownst to Voldemort his mutilated soul had nearly connected with the fragment in Harry's scar. However, they were not successful as Harry had pushed Voldemort out.

Had Harry stopped at this point, the wards would have been restored by the power that he had accessed in the Love Room and his own magic.

But all of this was unknown to Harry as he gazed upon the black mass. He could feel the power rolling off it, sinister and yet strangely intoxicating. He didn't know how long he stood there looking at it, was it a few seconds, hours, days or decades? Time, it seemed, had come to a halt as he gazed at what was in front of him before he reached out ... forever changing the course of the wizarding world.

Harry could feel the wrongness of the presence of the mass in front of him and he knew that it had to go. At the same time, he could feel the power it held. It intoxicated him ... called out to the darkness in his very soul created by his less than happy childhood and the

various encounters he had later on in his Hogwarts years ... and for the first time in his life, he listened.

The instant he came in contact with it, he felt the power rush into him. Immediately the dark presence that was enclosed within started fighting back, trying, in the process, to drain him.

But Harry wasn't dissuaded. He, with all of his considerable willpower, marshalled the newfound power within him and fought back. Harry also had a distinct advantage of a full soul, so the fragment of Voldemort's soul didn't really stand much of a chance. As the power flooded into him, it came with a cacophony of sights and sounds, disjointed memories and thoughts.

Just as Harry felt that he might burst from the influx of power and lose his sanity from all the foreign thoughts within his mind, it abruptly stopped. A bloodcurdling scream then shattered the abrupt silence as the malignant black mass in front of him disappeared.

Harry opened his eyes to find himself staring at the floor of the ministry atrium with a pounding head. The wet feeling on his forehead coupled with the coppery smell of blood and the pain in his scar told him that it had burst open and was bleeding. Harry then slowly and gingerly got to his feet using the wall for support.

As he got up, he absently noticed that a few wisps of a foul looking black smoke had come out of his scar. Disoriented, he barely noticed as Voldemort Apparated momentarily and disappeared with a weeping Bellatrix right in front of the minister and half of the ministry.

Albus Dumbledore took a moment to look at Harry to ascertain whether or not he was alright before turning his attention to Fudge, who took that moment to stagger forward white-faced, escorted by the golden statues animated by Dumbledore followed by his equally white-faced Aurors and an appalled Amelia Bones.

'He was there!' shouted a scarlet robed man in a ponytail, pointing at the pile of golden rubble that was the remains of the animated statue of the wizard that had trapped Bellatrix a few moments ago. 'I swear it was You-Know-Who Mr. Fudge. He took that woman and Disapparated just now!'

'I saw him too Williamson' gibbered a white faced Fudge,

'He was right here! In the Ministry no less,' Fudge continued rambling for a bit, moaning at the state of the Fountain before Dumbledore got his attention.

Normally Harry would have felt glee and taken a vindictive pleasure at the look on the Minister's face as he was finally proven to be right and not as the Minister believed "a deranged attention seeking liar trying to destabilise the peace in the Wizarding World by inciting panic". But Harry was too tired to feel anything. The loss of his godfather hadn't sunk in and throwing Voldemort had been rather taxing on his magic.

So he watched tiredly as Dumbledore proceeded to rub the fact that he was right all along in his own subtle way into Fudge's face before all but ordering the Minister of Magic to send some of his Aurors to apprehend the Death Eaters captured down in the Department of Mysteries.

Dumbledore then took the head of a statue and turned it into a portkey to his office (much to Fudge's impotent displeasure) and gave it to Harry.

Harry numbly took the portkey, and, feeling a familiar jerk behind his navel was whisked off to the Headmaster's office in Hogwarts, where his faith in Dumbledore would be further broken.

Harry stumbled out of Dumbledore's office about an hour later, his mind a swirl of many different emotions; chief among which was anger, grief and shock followed by a deep sense of betrayal. Just a few minutes back Dumbledore had seen fit to finally open up to Harry and tell him things he ought to have known much earlier. Suffice to say, Harry was not pleased with Dumbledore's earlier reticence.

At least it was a good thing that Dumbledore had taken nearly half an hour to come and then turn his world upside down, Harry mused. That had given him the time needed for him to gather his strength and adequately show his displeasure, destroying half the headmaster's office was pretty satisfying to say the least. And considering what Dumbledore had revealed to him, Harry could

really not find it within him to even come up with an iota of guilt for destroying all those stupid silver instruments.

Underlying it all was a rather peculiar emotion that Harry was feeling, he could not name it. Though if pressed, he would describe it as 'disorientation'.

As it was, Harry could scarcely believe that it was still morning. Right now, he felt like going to sleep and not waking up. Ever.

Harry started towards the Gryffindor tower only to stop halfway. He was in no mood for human company right now, much less the company of vapid, snivelling, immature teenagers. He needed to think, to sort out the mess that was his head. A place not many people knew about.

Pondering this, he finally came to a decision, and, mind made up, he directed his feet towards the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy, where, after thinking of a peaceful place to rest and think, walked into the door which materialised on the blank stretch of wall opposite the tapestry.

Harry stepped into the Room of Requirement to find what looked like a small meadow under a cloudless sky. He lay down on a slight protrusion in the middle of the field to find that it did not feel like what he expected the ground to feel like. It was as soft as his four-poster in the Gryffindor dorm; in fact, he would say that it felt even more comfortable than his dorm bed. It was a decidedly odd if comfortable sensation, Harry thought absently before turning his thoughts to what had just happened.

First was the fact that his godfather had died, and here Harry's eyes started to glisten; Sirius was the first adult in Harry's life who actually cared for him and only him. Sure, he had Mrs. Weasley and Remus, but they weren't the same. Mrs. Weasley was his friend's mother and he really didn't know Remus that well comparatively. Harry wasn't blind to Sirius' faults, he knew that Sirius was a bit brash and reckless, and tended to act before thinking, and was also, Harry mused, slightly delusional and immature, but then again, he had been locked up for quite a long time, the Dementors definitely had to have an effect on his mind. Either that, or insanity runs in the Black Family, Harry thought, thinking of Bellatrix and how sadistically crazy she was.

His mood darkened as he thought of Bellatrix, Harry scowled as he saw her sneering face in his mind's eye. One day, I'll kill that bitch, he thought with malevolence imagining her form writhing under his wand in pain.

Harry abruptly stopped as he realised the rather violent directions his thoughts had taken. He didn't want to torture Bellatrix, did he? But a small part of him that he had not heard of before did. It craved her blood, the sound of her tortured screams; the satisfaction of watching the pain in her eyes as life slowly and torturously left her body-

At that, Harry snapped out of his thoughts. What was that about? He wondered, certain that he had never felt that way about anyone before, and confused as to why he wasn't truly bothered with it. Shivering, he focused back on the events of the previous few hours.

Thoughts of Bellatrix naturally led him to the incident at the atrium where he had tried to use the Cruciatus Curse on her. They then moved on to the duel between Dumbledore and Voldemort. Harry felt awed by the power that was thrown around by those two wizards. That, he thought, was real magic Harry suddenly had a newfound craving to learn more to delve deeper into the depths of magic, to really see what could be done when one pushed the boundaries.

Eventually his mind drifted onto the aftermath of the battle and his subsequent possession by Voldemort. He shivered, that was one experience that he did not wish to repeat! He still felt the aftermath of that ordeal. Though he felt ... different somehow ... as if that had changed him forever. He did not know why or how but knew that in his gut.

Finally, his mind then turned towards the events in the Headmaster's office. His mood darkened, Dumbledore had said a lot of things that had angered him. Directly and indirectly; first off was that thrice damned prophecy. Harry couldn't believe that Dumbledore hadn't seen fit to tell him that before. Sure, a small part of him realised, he was too young at the time, and it was a heavy burden to place on anyone, much less a fifteen year old.

The duel between Dumbledore and Voldemort had definitely opened Harry's eyes to the harsh reality of what Voldemort really was like.

There was a reason why Voldemort was considered to be The Most Feared Dark Lord in Modern Times, why people feared to even name him. Voldemort was deadly! Harry was lucky to have survived him thus far, he knew that Voldemort had underestimated him before. He knew that it was luck that had saved him in all his encounters with Voldemort. If Voldemort wasn't so hell bent on showing off and had he actually decided to finish Harry off, exchanging grandstanding and enjoyment for utility and convenience, and had he taken Harry as seriously as he had taken Dumbledore, Harry wouldn't have stood a chance.

Voldemort definitely won't be playing around the next time they met, this Harry knew for sure. Guess it means that I'll have to find a way to ensure that he isn't at his best then, he thought.

Harry wondered why Dumbledore hadn't made a better effort to train him. He knew that it would eventually come down to him and Voldemort, so why not do anything? After all, Dumbledore had taken a major interest in his life...

Suddenly Harry shot up as he remembered a part of his last conversation with Dumbledore:

Dumbledore stared for a moment at the sunlit grounds outside the window, then looked back at Harry and said, 'Five years ago you arrived at Hogwarts, Harry, safe and whole, as I had planned and intended. Well – not quite whole. You had suffered. I knew you would when I left you on your aunt and uncle's doorstep. I knew I was condemning you to ten dark and difficult years.'

The last few sentences rang in Harry's mind. Dumbledore knew! He knew about my home life at the Dursleys, and he did NOTHING!

Harry began to see red, there was an odd ringing in his ears as his mind began to rapidly process that information, discovered new associations not thought of before and reached new conclusions;

His first Hogwarts letter that had been addressed to his cupboard; that really was proof that if not Dumbledore, at least McGonagall knew! After all she did sign the letters personally ... how could she have missed that? His conclusion was that she hadn't she was too intelligent to have, so either she was ignorant of the fact or she did not pursue the issue beyond notifying Dumbledore about it. Both

scenarios weren't too comforting. He refused to believe the third possibility that she knew but did not care. That situation was too horrible to fathom.

Then there was the man in the purple top hat, Dedalus Diggle, and the woman in the green dress, Emmeline Vance. Harry knew he had seen them somewhere before, and he realised then that he had and the significance; he had met them before he even knew of Hogwarts so they have been spying on me for what looks like all my life, yet they did nothing? Harry fumed

Then Harry had another epiphany; Mrs Figg: He had just found out last summer that she was a squib and in Dumbledore's Order. Unbidden, the memory of his encounter with her came to the forefront of his mind along with a part of what she had said;

'...I'm sorry I gave you such a miserable time Harry, but the Dursleys would never have let you come over if they'd thought you enjoyed it...'

'She knew too' Harry whispered to himself, horrified, 'She knew and didn't say ANYTHING!' Harry screamed out the last words.

At this, something in Harry snapped and he let out a primal scream of rage and anger, unleashing his magic out in a torrent of emotion. Wind whipped through the meadow and clouds formed overhead in the simulated sky. Wards flared up in the room in a bright display of colour as they contained the outburst of raw magic.

Finally, the stress and lack of sleep caught up with Harry and his rage subsided quickly. Drained, Harry finally passed out, all but dead to the world.

As Harry lost consciousness, his mind was still in peril. The soul fragment of Voldemort's within him had been destroyed; however, it wasn't a clean job...

The soul essentially consisted of a wizard's personality and his inherent magic. Now to get a personality, one needs to be able to draw from experience. Experience is a subconscious thought process, something that becomes ingrained in the brain. Basically they were what you'd call "muscle memory". Under normal conditions, had Harry not flown into a fit of rage and all but drained

his magic completely, what little magic that had remained in his body after his various battles with the Death Eaters and Voldemort would have been enough, even in his exhausted state (Harry was a powerful wizard after all) to wipe this off. Unfortunately, Harry's episode had caused magical exhaustion leaving his body with almost no magic at the moment.

As such, the remains of the soul fragment would be able to reassert itself, but still stay separate, essentially putting Harry back at square one. It would have eventually been consumed by Harry's soul as Harry regained enough magic to fight back, but it might have resulted in Harry being put up in a nice cosy bed in the permanent ward of St Mungo's.

After all, the general public opinion is that Schizophrenia isn't a good thing. And people that suffer from it are considered to be a danger to society, especially if their alternate personality is that of a megalomaniac Dark Lord.

However Harry was lucky enough to be in the heart of a near sentient magical castle.

The Room of Requirement was designed by Rowena Ravenclaw with help from the other three founders (not that she'd ever admit that) to be a sort of control centre/panic room for the castle should it ever fall under siege from "those filthy muggle heathens" (Gryffindor's words, not that he-or any historian for that matter-would ever admit it) that populated the wide world.

It was in a way, Ravenclaw's contribution to the castle's defence should the need arise. Gryffindor and Hufflepuff had created the wards as a first line of defence, while Slytherin had decided that a basilisk would be a good last line of defence (never mind the fact that the bloody snake would be as much a danger to the defenders, but when you are anyway going to be overrun and burned alive at the stake, death by basilisk stare is surprisingly preferable!)

However, the wards worked like a charm (considering that they were a part of that branch of magic) and as such, much to Ravenclaw's disappointment (not that she'd ever admit that either) the Room was never needed.

Over the centuries, as the magical world became more and more secure and isolated from the muggle world, and the castle became more of a school than a defence structure, the Room's original use was forgotten and was used for more mundane things. Eventually as the magic within the castle and the room built up over time, and the castle became more sentient, the room also changed and evolved through time till the current result was seen.

The room was also in a really bizarre magical way, in the centre of the castle which was situated exactly over an intersection of four different major ley lines, (the actual reason why the Founders had chosen this place to build their castle) there was a good concentration of magic in that area.

The castle sensed that the wizard lying prone right at the centre of its very heart was in major distress and needed help. So it started pumping a small fraction of the magic within it to help the boy.

This helped in integrating the soul fragments into Harry's soul, changing his very nature by a slight amount. Harry gained, in addition to his previously acquired ability to speak to snakes, an experience in duelling, something which Voldemort had perfected during his younger years before his rise into notoriety. Harry would have to increase his arsenal of spells on his own for this to be of any use though.

Another useful talent that he had picked up from those soul fragments would also be the knowledge of Apparating as well. Voldemort had done enough Apparating in his life that he could almost do so silently and without much thought in almost any position. He had also done quite a bit of Apparating through moderately powered anti-apparation wards as well as under the stress of combat. And now, Harry too could do so. Not that he knew that at the moment.

In addition to that Harry also had gained Voldemort's mastery of the mind arts. After all, Voldemort had been a practising Occlumens and Legilimens practising the arts almost constantly ever since his sixth year when he had discovered that art.

Now the body is rather conservative. Harry's magic was basically the reason why despite his relatives' treatment of him he didn't look like a one of those starved refugee children from a war torn country.

Most of his magic had gone into healing him and ensuring that his body was properly nourished. This had the effect of making him magically weaker, and also stunting his magical growth.

It was only because Harry was so naturally powerful that he still remained a wizard and the Dursleys' wishes of "beating the magic out of him" weren't realised. As such while he would be powerful, he would not be able to reach his full magical potential.

However, Hogwarts while sentient wasn't intelligent, and thus had underestimated the amount of magic that Harry would need. After all, "a little amount of magic" to it was more than enough power to make two squibs moderately powerful wizards. As a result of this, Harry had a lot of magic left over in his nearly empty core.

So his body used this opportunity and Harry's still growing core suddenly expanded so that by the time he reached his full maturity, Harry would be even more powerful than he would have ever been. There was also still enough magic left within him so that his body began to utilise it to take care of the last vestiges of malnutrition. As such Harry filled out a bit more so that he no longer looked pinched, but lean. His height increased by an extra inch or so till he was standing at a respectable six feet.

Hogwarts, sensing that he was still using magic to heal, decided to help a bit. The end result was the extra benefit of repairing Harry's impaired vision so he no longer was half blind without his glasses. Also, the numerous scars and bruises that Harry had collected till then healed over till they all disappeared. The notable exception being the scar on his forehead that instead of disappearing became lighter till it was barely discernible.

Finally, as Harry's body no longer had any pressing needs to take care of, the magical transfer stopped, leaving a much improved Harry Potter that now lay resting in the middle of the room.

I would like to thank my friends, FirePhoenix86 and McFluffin (check their stories out); you guys have been really helpful!

Read and review; flames shall be treated with a cold disdain and summarily ignored.

Harry Potter opened his eyes a few hours later, winced and immediately closed them again, groaning. His limbs were sore, his head was pounding with a vengeance and everything seemed way too bright. Opening his eyes again he found himself in what looked to be a meadow and, judging by the light in the sky it looked to be late evening. Confused, he sat up suddenly; the pounding in his head increased making him dizzy. Clutching his head, he squeezed his eyes shut as he waited for the feeling to pass.

As he began to feel a bit normal, he opened his eyes again and took in his surroundings: the door standing at the far end as well as the way the meadow seemed to end abruptly reminded him that he was in the Room of Requirement. With this realisation, the memories of the past came back.

He briefly considered running away from the wizarding world, perhaps also writing a letter telling Voldemort that he was not interested in fighting him and getting him to agree to a ceasefire. He scoffed internally at that thought.

Dear Dark Lord, thought Harry sardonically,

How are you? I hope that your one attempt at possessing me and subsequent ejection from my mind did not cause you too much of pain and that this letter finds you in good mental health (relatively speaking).

Anyway, after the numerous sojourns that we have had with each other I have come to the realisation that fighting you is not really what I want to do. The only reason I hated you is because you killed my parents, people I now realise that I never knew much. As such since they also were the casualties of a war, and had chosen to fight against you and had lost, I find myself caring even lesser about that fact now.

Thinking back on it, I also find that the other reason for fighting you (that you tried to kill me as a baby) a bit silly as well. Looking back on it, I realise that you were actually trying to carry out an act of kindness in trying to spare me the agony of growing up without parents. So there really is no reason for me to fight you! And I realise that you have nothing personal against me.

Thus, I have decided to stop fighting you and let you continue on your quest for world domination. After all, it's not like I care about the fate of a million plus strangers. What have they done for me that I should care for their existence or continued happiness?

As a show of good faith, I will tell you the full prophecy and will be shortly moving to Australia. I will also include my address here too!

Yours faithfully,

Harry Potter.

Harry snorted to himself. Even in his head that sounded lame and naïve. He knew that Voldemort had taken Harry's continued existence as a personal insult. To him, Harry was the one that got away, the only survivor of Voldemort's numerous attempts to kill him. The fact that he wasn't even out of school was a further blow to Voldemort's ego.

The fact that Voldemort happened to be a megalomaniac only made matters worse. Harry also knew that Voldemort would not rest till Harry was dead and that he saw Harry still being alive as a "threat to his power".

Add in the fact that he believed in the prophecy, and thus finding the full contents of which would make him even more convinced that as long as Harry lived, he was a threat to his dreams of world domination, Harry was positively certain beyond a doubt that Voldemort would ensure that Harry died by his own hand.

Harry was sure that the mad man would have first taken over Britain before going after him. And then Harry would be royally screwed since Voldemort would have legitimate authority behind him.

Also, now that he thought about it, Dumbledore would also spend his time and effort in tracking him down too, since he too believed in that prophecy.

All in all, running away right now was more than trouble than it was worth. So Harry dismissed the option of just leaving everybody to Voldemort, as much as he felt that the wizarding world deserved it. Besides, he did have friends here, and he wasn't willing for them to suffer. And, come to think of it, he did not fancy living life on the run.

With this in mind, Harry started plotting ways in which he could bring down Voldemort. He knew that the Dark Wizard was more powerful and had a lot of experience, something that Harry had no hope of achieving. Harry knew that he himself was powerful; after all, he could produce a Patronus at thirteen, (something many full grown wizards had trouble doing) he also could resist the Imperius cast by Voldemort himself! (Again, something most wizards couldn't do.)

However, all that power wouldn't be of much help to Harry without experience, and there Voldemort had the advantage. Unless Harry mused, I can catch him by surprise ... get him when he least expects it and overwhelm him ... Harry trailed off, that plan could be looked into much later, in the mean time, perhaps it would be more prudent to look into training himself in fighting competently. Now that he thought about it, he supposed that he should be thankful that the Death Eaters had been so focused on the prophecy last night, or he was sure that he would've had his arse handed to himself.

With that in mind, Harry made a mental checklist. First off he obviously needed to get the appropriate books which he was sure wouldn't be found in the school library. Even if they were around, he was sure that Dumbledore wouldn't approve of his reading material. I bet that old twat would make some excuse and take those books away while acting as if he was doing me a bloody favour thought Harry scathingly.

With that thought, Harry got up, and as he took his first step, stumbled. Startled, he looked down. The ground looked farther than he was used to. He then noticed that his arms were sticking out by a few extra inches from the sleeves of his robes.

After spending a moment looking at his sleeves, the next thing that came to Harry's notice was his vision. Things looked a bit too clear to him. With a jolt, he realised that he was not wearing his glasses as he clearly could see the item in question at the corner of his eye (something that was impossible a few short hours ago).

Harry shrugged; he was used to strange things happening around him and as such couldn't find much to complain about right now seeing as he was rather pleased with the results. He absently noticed that his robes were a bit tight across his chest. His trainers also seemed a bit snug.

Just as Harry was debating walking back to the dorm barefoot (as he refused to let anyone see Vernon's old socks on his feet), a new pair of trainers and socks suddenly appeared in front of him. Realising the significance of the room that he was currently occupying, Harry concentrated and a set of new clothes (right down to underwear) appeared in front of him.

Harry changed into these, discarding his old soiled robes and tatty trainers before leaving the room not bothering to take his old clothes and shoes; he had a vague thought that the room would be able to recycle those. Pocketing his glasses, he exited the Room of Requirement and headed towards Gryffindor Tower.

As Harry entered the tower, he found a nearly empty common room. A glance out of the window showed that it was actually late morning (despite the scenery Harry had woken up to in the Room). Harry remembered that today was a Hogsmeade weekend. The few first and second years that were looking at him warily further proved this theory.

Sighing, Harry went back out and headed outside. He had no desire to be gawked at by titchy little eleven and twelve year olds, nor did he feel like sitting in his dorm.

As he headed towards a secluded corner in the grounds, a flash of white caught his eye. Turning, he noticed Dumbledore striding across the grounds, with, Harry was surprised to note, Professor McGonagall, who was leaning on a cane. They were headed to the gates, deep in conversation. Harry followed at a distance and watched as Dumbledore bade the Deputy Headmistress goodbye before Disapparating.

McGonagall turned around and started as she found Harry Potter staring back at her. She absently noticed something different about him, but could not place her finger on it.

'Good afternoon Mr. Potter, how may I help you?' said McGonagall in a concerned tone, she had heard about what had transpired before and was worried about the boy in front of her.

'Afternoon Professor,' said Harry casually, 'I was just headed to Hogsmeade and I couldn't help but notice you and Professor

Dumbledore. I gather that he has gone to meet Fudge again?' he said, the lie coming surprisingly easily to him.

McGonagall raised an eyebrow in surprise, 'The Headmaster is a busy man Mr. Potter, even more so thanks to recent events.' Harry flinched a bit at her words, 'He has been summoned by our esteemed minister for his advice on certain matters.'

'Will Fudge be giving Professor Dumbledore his old positions back then?'

'If Minister Fudge knows what's good for him, he would be doing that today itself,' said McGonagall wryly, 'Though, considering his track record of late that may be debatable.'

'It looks like Professor Dumbledore has a busy day ahead of him then.'

'Indeed, Mr. Potter, I suspect he may not be able to make it till midnight at the earliest. Was there anything you required of him?'

'Oh nothing really Professor, it was just idle curiosity,' Harry lied again.

McGonagall regarded Harry with concern. 'Are you alright, Harry? From what I have heard about what happened in the Ministry, I thought that it must have been rather traumatising for you, I for one did not expect you to be out and about today of all days.'

'I'm fine Professor. I guess that the reality of the situation hasn't sunk in yet. I just wanted some time alone for myself so I could think, and decided to take a walk in the village,' said Harry, putting his training with the Dursleys to good use. The previous revelations and events had gone a long way in destroying any lingering reservations he had of manipulating and lying to others for his own gains.

'Very well, Harry if you need anything, my door will always be open to you should you need help, don't hesitate to ask.'

'Sure, thank you Professor,' said Harry, he tried not to think about how "helpful" she had been when he had tried to share his concerns about the Philosopher's Stone, or how "helpful" she had been when

people were spreading rumours about his being the Heir of Slytherin, or when Draco Malfoy had been distributing those badges in Fourth Year. He really did, but he was only human in the end. And currently rather ticked off at the moment.

Harry somehow managed to keep his face straight as he brushed by her. As he passed through the gates, he scowled before his expression changed to one of anticipated excitement.

Dumbledore was not in Hogwarts at the moment, and wouldn't be there for the whole day! Also, since the students were out in the village, Harry wouldn't be missed. Especially since his friends (he thought with a twinge of guilt) were in the hospital wing. In fact none of the teachers would be expecting him to show up at dinner either! Not that Harry planned on staying that long, but it was something to think of.

Harry furtively made his way to the outskirts of the village. He was jubilant that he hadn't been seen by anyone he knew or recognised by the throng of students mingling around.

However, that was short lived when the problem of actually getting to Diagon Alley came to him.

He initially thought of using the Knight Bus, but was leery as he knew that would draw a lot of attention. What with the racket that machine could kick up. The fact that it looked like Ernie Prang practiced playing Need for Speed a few dozen times before getting the job of driving that purple Triple-Decker monstrosity, coupled with the prospect of meeting Stan Shunpike (who considered it his sacred duty to stick his overly pimply nose into other people's business), Harry was understandably hesitant in using that mode of transportation.

The Floo was out of the question as he would need to get to the fireplace in The Three Broomsticks, where he risked being recognised. He could not exactly break into a house, as that would probably gain him even more attention than he needed. The Hogs Head also was out of the question as he was pretty sure that the bartender there was rather chummy with a certain meddlesome old man.

If only he could Apparate, he thought wistfully; then he would be able to get there in no time and with minimal fuss.

Lost in thoughts of being able to appear instantly at his destination, Harry did not notice a slight shift in his magic, busy as he was in imagining himself just at the entrance of Diagon Alley.

But he definitely noticed that his environment had changed. In front of him, instead of the hills surrounding Hogsmeade, he saw Diagon Alley with Gringotts rising up in the distance. Startled, he looked back to see the archway that would lead to the Leaky Cauldron.

Did I just Apparate? Thought Harry incredulously, from what he had heard from Fred and George when he had badgered them about Apparating, the process was supposed to be rather difficult accompanied by a sensation of being squeezed through a tube.

However, Harry hadn't felt that, nor did he feel any difficulty. In fact it just felt right. It was the same feeling he had when he had first flown on a broom. That he somehow (on some instinctual level) knew what to do, and had done it for quite a few times.

Shrugging, Harry set off toward Gringotts; he had more important matters to take care of and little time, he also needed money.

Entering the bank, Harry noticed that it being a Saturday afternoon, the bank was relatively empty. Moving towards the nearest free teller, he said with a hint of trepidation, 'Excuse me, I would like to access my vault please, but I don't have the key, so was wonder-'

'Name?' came the surly reply, cutting Harry off mid sentence

'Uh, Harry Potter,' said Harry stammering a little.

The goblin brought out a bronze disk and a knife and said, 'Place some of your blood here to verify your identity.'

Harry sliced his finger and squeezed out a few drops and handed the knife and disk back. He watched, startled, as the goblin licked some of the blood from the disk off.

Wearing a thoughtful look as if he was sampling a glass of vintage wine, the goblin finally said 'Very well, Mr. Potter, you are who you

say you are. I will get somebody to escort you to your account manager. Griphook!"

'Did you just lick my blood?' said Harry incredulously, and not with a hint of disgust.

'Trust me Mr. Potter, I did not enjoy the experience,' said the teller impatiently. 'Now if you have do not have any more questions, please follow Griphook. If you have more questions, find someone else to annoy!'

'Alright, alright, no need to be so snarky,' Harry muttered under his breath, turning away. Hearing the teller snort, he turned back and saw the goblin tap his nameplate wearing a look of amusement. Looking at it, Harry understood the reason for the goblin's amusement. He snorted at the word Snarktooth written there and hurried to catch up to his escort.

Griphook led him through another door at the back of the bank and into a long corridor interspersed with more doors. Harry remembered his name of course (who wouldn't since that was the first goblin name he had heard) but didn't see the need to point that out. He doubted that the goblin would take kindly to it (or care). For all Harry knew, they may take offence to it. He silently resolved to look up goblin culture in the near future. After all, they did handle his money...

Near the end of the corridor, the line of doors stopped; leaving a blank stretch of walls that continued on into darkness. Harry wondered what there was at the end before turning his attention back to Griphook as he knocked on the slightly opulent door that said 'Gornuk'.

Entering, he greeted the goblin that was seated at the desk on the other side of the large and spacious office and was bid to sit.

Settling down into the large armchair, Harry got straight down to business. He figured from his earlier experiences that goblins did not waste time with pleasantries and liked to get to the heart of the matter. It also didn't hurt that he was currently strapped for time.

Leaning forward Harry said, 'Good day to you account manager Gornuk, I would like to inquire about the state of my accounts.'

'It's just Gornuk, Mr Potter, managing your account is just my job, not my title ... I was wondering when you would come in Mr. Potter,' said the large elderly goblin at the other end. 'I was expecting you on the day of your fifteenth birthday ... nonetheless you are here now, although, I do not see your magical guardian around, will he be joining us shortly?' he said looking at Harry inquiringly

Harry was surprised at this last statement; he didn't know that he had a magical guardian, but he had a sneaking suspicion as to who that could be. 'I had no idea that I had a magical guardian,' he said slowly, 'I came here on my own when I knew that I would be free and unsupervised.'

'You should have been informed about your magical guardian Mr. Potter,' said the elderly goblin. 'However, it is quite easy to figure out who it is. All Muggleborn children are assigned a magical guardian when they reach the age of eleven and are sorted into their house at Hogwarts. Normally, that person is the minor's Head of House, but considering your, ah, unique situation, the headmaster has seen it fit to take on that responsibility.'

'But I am not Muggleborn,' said Harry, strangely insulted at being compared to Muggleborns.

'Indeed not Mr. Potter,' said the goblin, 'but the since you were Muggle raised, it was considered prudent by all parties involved that you should be treated as Muggleborn. At any rate,' he continued, ignoring the sour look on Harry's face, 'the reality is that your magical guardian is Albus Dumbledore, but you should know that. It is his duty to inform you of that fact ... surely, he told you in one of your meetings?'

'What meetings?' said Harry nonplussed.

'The mandatory meetings that all wards have with their magical guardians during their first two years of schooling, of course,'

Then Harry remembered the odd times that Hermione Granger used to disappear for a few hours all those years ago. He never thought to ask her where she had gone and was quite happy to assume that she was in the library. Harry supposed that she might have had her scheduled meetings with McGonagall. Suddenly it made more sense

to Harry on how she seemed to know a lot about of the magical world. McGonagall was teaching her.

It also brought a new meaning to all that waffle about "the House being family" that McGonagall had been spouting when she was talking to them before their sorting, now that he thought about it.

'I never had any of those meetings,' said Harry; he was a bit miffed at the headmaster's inattentiveness. It would have been nice to have some help fitting into the wizarding world, instead of feeling stupid whenever a subject he did not know of was talked about.

'That is rather irregular,' said the goblin, frowning. 'It is the duty of the magical guardian to help the ward to acclimatize to the wizarding world. It seems that Dumbledore has neglected his duties.'

It wouldn't be the first time, Harry thought bitterly, before a thought came to him, 'Has Dumbledore tried to access my accounts or withdrawn anything?'

'Let me see...' said Gornuk standing up and moving to a filing cabinet nearby, taking out a ledger, he sat back down and leafed through it.

'From your trust vault, the only withdrawals made were made by you on the summer before your first, second and third years, and by a Molly Weasley on the summer before your fourth and fifth years, correct?' he said looking up at Harry. Seeing him nod, he looked back down, 'From your family vault, your magical guardian has taken out two heirlooms; one Pensieve and one Invisibility Cloak. The Pensieve had been loaned by your grandfather indefinitely until he or his heirs (mainly you) decide to reclaim it. While the cloak was taken on the summer of 1998 before you began your first year; the reason being that it was to be given to you shortly. Did you receive The Cloak?'

Harry seethed, that old bastard! He takes my cloak from my family vault and has the gall to pretend that it was given to him by my father? Reining his emotions, he affirmed the receipt of the Cloak sounding rather calm.

'Also, in addition to this, a small monetary stipend has been set up for your caregivers, the Dursleys I believe?'

'How much, and who set that up?' said Harry, his voice quavering a bit as he tried not to explode.

'Around Five Hundred Galleons per month for twelve months for the first ten years between 1988 and 1997, this amount was reduced from '97 onwards to Two Hundred Galleons per month for three months. At the current rate of exchange, that would be Two Thousand Five Hundred GBP and One Thousand GBP a month respectively. It was done to cover the costs of your upkeep and wellbeing.'

Upon hearing this Harry became enraged. However, he knew that it would serve no purpose here. Automatically (as if his brain knew what to do) he found the rage being marginalised. This gave him a sense of tranquillity and an air of peace. The rage was there, but kept aside for awhile.

Focusing back on the goblin in front of him, Harry said, 'Is there any way I can recover all that money back? Because it seems that they have not used any of that money on me or my wellbeing.'

Gornuk narrowed his eyes, 'If you saying what I think you are saying Mr. Potter, then it looks like your relatives have breached their contract.'

Harry's mind filled with possibilities, the chance to get back at the Dursleys was pretty enticing, 'What can be done?'

'Your relatives have signed a magical contract when they agreed to raise you as it was written in their letter. A duplicate has been filed in a Muggle subsidiary of ours, the Bank of Scotland. I could get an investigation started and then alert the Muggle authorities, but that may take awhile. It's the only shot we have of prosecuting them,' Gornuk said.

'Get that done then, they shall pay for stealing from me!' said Harry.

'I will be more than happy to oblige Mr. Potter, as technically they have also stolen from Gringotts as well, and we do not like thieves,' said Gornuk with a feral smile.

'Though,' he continued disgruntled, 'we still haven't found that thief who broke into our bank five years ago.'

'Oh, I know what you are talking about!' said Harry suddenly. 'His name was Quirinus Quirrel, and he was the Defence against the Dark Arts teacher in my first year. I did not know that you were still looking for him, or else I would have said something...'

'And how do you know of the thief's identity?' said Gornuk with underlying excitement in his voice.

'He admitted it to me, and before you ask, there is no point looking for him since he is dead.'

'I am aware of that Mr. Potter,' said Gornuk, 'but how did he die?'

'I killed him,' Harry said simply. 'It was in self defence though,' he hastily added.

Gornuk looked at Harry for a while, an inscrutable look on his face, before he opened his mouth, 'Was his death long drawn and painful?' he sounded almost hopeful.

Thinking of the events of his first year, Harry replied with a small amount of relish, 'Oh yes, he was practically burnt to a crisp!'

Gornuk bared his teeth, 'Good, I will have the promised reward transferred to your vault as soon as possible.'

'Reward?' asked Harry blankly,

'Of course!' said Gornuk, 'You have done a great service to our bank, and we goblins never forget our debts, so as a token of our appreciation, we gift you with half a million Galleons. And we also will give you the full contents of the thief's family vault as a bonus for doing our job for us in killing him in such a fitting way. That vault currently has seven hundred and fifty Galleons in liquid cash and valuables.'

'Wait,' said Harry, 'Not that I don't appreciate the gesture, but what about the other members of the Quirrel family? Won't they suffer?'

'No need to fret Mr. Potter,' said Gornuk dismissively, 'the only surviving relative of the thief happens to be his widowed sister, a Mrs. Umbridge if I am not mistaken,' he said.

'Oh,' said Harry, her approval of him as a teacher making sense to him now. 'In that case, thank you!' said Harry with a vindictive gleam in his eye.

'It's Gringotts who should be thanking you Mr. Potter,' said Gornuk. He continued with a sorrowful tone, 'Though if I remember correctly, a dragon was grievously injured and the door of the vault needed to be replaced. It looks like we'll have to take out the remaining expenses from the thief's next of kin now that his vault is no longer available.' He sighed regretfully, though the glint in his eyes told another story, 'Poor Madam Umbridge.'

'Indeed,' chuckled Harry imagining Umbridge's face when she found out. It looked like she had made enemies with her bankers ... foolish of her really, Harry mused.

'Anyway, back to business,' said Gornuk briskly, rubbing his gnarled hands. He reached out and took out a piece of parchment. Tapping it, he turned it to Harry, 'This is the current status of your vaults, including the reward that you have earned,' he gave Harry a minute to peruse it before continuing, 'As you can see, your net worth happens to be around Five Hundred and Fifty Million Galleons. Admittedly, the Potter fortune has dropped in value since it has lain dormant for all these years as some investments have not done so well, but now that you are of an age where you can claim the vaults and manage them, it can be reactivated. I have many plans for it. Hopefully, your family will regain its billionaire status by the end of the next fiscal year.'

Harry was stunned, he knew that the Potters were an ancient and wealthy family after having researched everything he could about them the first chance he got (after all who wouldn't?) but this was staggering. Well, at least he wouldn't need to work to earn his living.

His thoughts were diverted as Gornuk pushed some sheets of parchment towards him. 'You will need to sign these to get full control of your vaults,' he said, 'and you need to sign these to void any claims your magical guardian has over you, since he has proven to be ineffective.' He added, taking out another sheaf.

As Harry started signing, Gornuk continued, 'As your account manager, I will be able to make decisions which will help build your wealth, as your fortunes are tied in with mine, it will be mutually beneficial to both of us. Also, as my first act as your account manager, I have compiled a list of investments that I recommend you authorise, along with a list of businesses that you are either the investor of or included as partner.'

Harry spotted a name in the list and exclaimed, 'Weasley's Wizard Wheezes? They made me their partner?'

'Indeed Mr. Potter, after all, you did give them money to help their business,' said Gornuk. 'A fine investment, I predict that their inventiveness may give Zonko's a run for its money. Speaking of which, here's a list of investments that have gone bad or are not going to be of benefit to you.' he said, giving Harry another list.

Harry cleared his throat, 'Is there a way to replace my vault keys? I am afraid that I no longer am in possession of them since Mrs. Weasley has forgotten to return my trust vault key, and I have never been given my family vault key. I would also like to make a withdrawal.'

'You should be careful with your keys, Mr. Potter, you never know when a person could get hold of it and use it to help themselves to your money,' admonished Gornuk with a frown.

'At any rate,' he continued, after watching Harry squirm a bit, 'Sign here and we will issue you a new set of keys. Your family vault keys are with me and will not be needed after the wards to the vault are calibrated to your touch.'

After Harry signed the latest batch of forms, Gornuk said, 'Excellent, everything is in order; I will carry out the instructions and start making the necessary transactions, and we can start rebuilding your fortunes.'

At that moment, somebody knocked at the door. When bid to enter, the person turned out to be another goblin. Upon looking at the occupants inside, he said, 'Ragnok has requested your presence. The both of you.'

Surprised, Gornuk stood up and strode towards the door, Harry following him. Harry noticed that this time they had gone to the far end of the corridor where a single ornate door stood, guarded by two burly goblin guards. Entering, Harry saw an office as big as the Dursley house. At the far end behind a large desk, sat a richly appointed goblin, in front of whom was another elderly goblin.

Ragnok stood up from behind his desk and said in a gravelly tone, 'ah Gornuk, so glad of you to join us, and Mr. Potter as well ... Come, sit!' waving his hand at the surly looking goblin in front of him he said, 'This is Grimjaw, the head of the Black accounts.'

'Good to meet you too sir,' said Harry politely, 'May I ask what this is about?' he added in a slightly curious tone.

Ragnok and Grimjaw gave Harry an appraising look appreciating his display of manners and directness.

'It has recently come to our attention that the last male member of the Black family has passed away,' said Grimjaw in a serious tone. 'In a previous visit to the bank, he had made a will naming you as his heir and entitling you to the entire Black estate and all its titles. However, Lord Black was aware of the fact that only male members of the Black family may inherit the title. So in anticipation of that, had decided to perform a blood adoption ritual taking you in as his son. He had informed me that he was planning on carrying out the ritual sometime before your sixteenth birthday.'

Harry was stunned Sirius planned on adopting him? On making him his own son?

Harry's deepest wish was to have a real father, and to know that Sirius had considered him as his son to the point of making it legal touched a long dormant part of him. He felt elated, and yet this made Sirius' loss even more profound. Realising that there was work to be done, he quickly filed his emotions away, and concentrated on the situation.

'But Sirius died before he could adopt me,' he said.

'That is obvious' drawled Grimjaw, 'However, your godfather was prepared for just this situation and has left a vial of his blood under a stasis charm,' saying this, Grimjaw took out a large vial that held

about a litre of blood. 'This will be more than enough to carry out the ritual making you his heir by blood and magic. Lord Black, however, had instructed me to inform you that it is your decision whether or not you wish to carry out the ritual.'

To Harry, there was only one answer to that question, 'Yes I will do it,' he said.

'Good, but be warned, the ritual will be a long and painful process. Depending on the situation, it may take a day to complete.'

Harry thought for a while and said, 'How complex is this ritual? I want to know because I need to be in Hogwarts before nightfall and was wondering if I can do the ritual myself.'

Ragnok hesitated and said, 'Mr. Potter, blood rituals are strictly regulated in Britain. While the blood adoption ritual is not exactly banned, it is a risky business legally speaking. However, Gringotts is goblin territory and that law is not observed. But should you do this outside, and be discovered, there may be severe repercussions, and you may not be recognised as a legitimate heir.'

Harry thought for a while and then said, 'What if Gringotts officially states for the record that the ritual happened in here? Then in the eyes of the Ministry, the ritual would be legal.'

The goblins looked at each other and after a brief conversation in rapid Gobbledegook, turned back to Harry. Grimjaw said, 'Well, you still won't be able to perform the ritual on your own as some of the parts require outside assistance. However, as you are pressed for time, perhaps we can come to Hogwarts and set it up. And you do not need to worry about us being detected; we have our methods of remaining undetected.'

Harry thought on that for a while and said, 'Very well, I will contact you soon and we can set up an appointment.' Harry thanked them and made his leave with Gornuk escorting him.

They had nearly reached the end of the corridor when Gornuk remarked casually, 'You know Mr. Potter, there is an interesting person at the end of Knockturn Alley who is very talented. Many Purebloods go to his shop to avail his services ... something that might interest a person in your current position...'

'Thank you, I will be sure to visit him.' said Harry after a pause.

'I never told you to visit him; after all, what he does isn't legal. No, I just said that there was an interesting man who goes by the name of Alberich at the end of Knockturn Alley and that if hypothetically, anyone who wanted to meet him, they should knock on the door three times and show him this ring.' he held up a ring, 'Not that you would be interested ... oh well, might as well dispose of it, I have no use for it.' With that he casually tossed the ring over his shoulder where it landed on the floor near Harry's feet.

'Now when you go outside, be sure to talk to Snarktooth, he will have your new keys and two debit cards calibrated to your vaults. The card will be valid in the Muggle world as well, and the one tuned to your family vault has a limit of ten thousand Galleons per month till you turn seventeen.'

'Well, Mr. Potter, I will now take my leave, I trust that you can make it out on your own?' Seeing Harry nod, Gornuk turned around and left for his office.

Harry picked up the ring and put it in his pocket with a grin. Moving out, he went to Snarktooth, who gave him his new keys and cards. Pocketing these, Harry left the bank.

Stepping outside, he noticed with surprise that it was still an hour or so before noon. He supposed that the goblins may have used a time distortion charm or something in their offices. It seemed plausible as they were the sort who would squeeze their money's worth from every second they could get. Either that or it might have been the amount of information that he had to process in a short time.

Following Gornuk's "advice" Harry made his way to Knockturn Alley. Raising the hood of his cloak, he started walking in long confident strides, avoiding eye contact with the other denizens of the street, focused on his destination. It would not do to appear to be lost or vulnerable after all.

Near the end, Harry spotted a door with an elaborate carving of a woman seducing a horde of demons at her feet and holding an amphora. Knocking thrice caused the woman's eyes to move and look at him. Unnerved, Harry held up the ring.

The woman's eyes flashed once before the door opened. Entering, Harry saw a small shop filled with odd trinkets and baubles. At the counter sat a man with flowing blonde hair and deep blue eyes.

Harry nervously swallowed and gathering his courage said, 'Alberich, I presume? I was told that you would be able to help me.'

The man raised an eyebrow and said in a deep melodious voice, 'It depends on the type of help one is looking for. If you happen to be an individual who wants to hide from ... people ... then, yes I can help.'

'What can you do?' asked Harry curiously.

'I mainly specialise in stealth and anonymity. The charms I know are unique and an invention of mine so cannot be duplicated, detected or broken. They are specifically targeted towards ministry sensors, and as such the ministry will not be able to find my clients should they, say, use magic in a non magical environment, for example,' said Alberich. 'And if the customer happens to be underage, I can also help remove The Trace without the ministry knowing a thing.' He added with a knowing look on his face.

'I also can analyse a person's magic and possibly take care of any problems within, all for a price of course.'

Harry now understood the secrecy behind meeting this man, he was sure that the ministry was oblivious to this man's existence along with the most of the wizarding population. With the obvious exception of a few purebloods, and other wizards (possibly assassins) who, Harry was sure, had used this man's services to avoid detection.

'I would like to have The Trace removed, and would also like my magic masked so that it cannot be detected. And, if you can manage it, I would like something that would help me blend in but not make me truly invisible. I am tired of having people stare at me, and at the same time have no desire in avoiding bumping into them. And if you could do that diagnosis thing of yours, I would appreciate that as well.'

'Very well,' said Alberich after a pause, pulling out his wand, he began to mutter a long string of a language Harry did not understand.

Lowering his wand, the man frowned and said, 'I cannot remove The Trace.'

Great, Harry thought with trepidation and a little resignation, barely anything could go right with him, 'Why not?' he asked nervously.

'That is because The Trace is no longer on your person.' Said Alberich thoughtfully, 'did you have it removed by someone else?' he asked suspiciously.

'Er, no,' said Harry,

Alberich studied Harry for a while and then said, 'Let me see if I can get to the bottom of this,' his eyes then started glowing as he stared at Harry intently.

After a minute or two just as Harry was becoming uncomfortable with all the staring, Alberich closed his eyes and said, 'Interesting.'

'Er what is?' asked Harry nervously,

'It seems that your core has undergone a massive overhaul and has practically been reset,' said Alberich opening his eyes. 'I sense some recent changes, nothing bad.' he added looking at Harry's worried face, 'basically any foreign magic placed on you has been obliterated by your magic, not only has the trace been removed but an advanced tracking charm as well and something that vaguely looks like a hole has been plugged, I am not too sure of that as whatever it was that the hole led to no longer ... exists ... it is centred around your scar though.' He said vaguely, looking at Harry's forehead, 'I have also noticed that it has undergone a massive expansion and if I am not mistaken your core will be growing a bit more by the time you reach your mid twenties. You are a rather powerful wizard, and possibly may be the most powerful one of your generation.' He paused for a while considering Harry, and then said, 'Have you undergone any great magical stress recently?'

Trying not to think too much of the events of the past night, Harry said, 'Yeah, I did fight off a possession shortly after a battle for my life against superior numbers, and then,' he continued with a little

embarrassment, 'I fainted a little while later because I had released a large amount of magic as the events caught up with me.' Noticing the look of slight disbelief on the man's face, he snapped, 'Read tomorrow's Prophet, you'll figure it out!'

Holding his hands out in a gesture of peace, the man said, 'I believe you Mr. Potter, though you must admit, that isn't something you hear every day.'

Harry snorted, 'No it isn't,' he said wryly, not bothering to ask how the man knew his name.

'At any rate, the good news is that the Trace is no longer on you and there is nothing wrong with your core. Now I can still do the other things you asked of me, if you wish?'

Upon receiving Harry's nod, the man then showed Harry a few chains and necklaces. Harry picked out a thick linked silver chain, upon giving it a closer look he noticed small diamonds placed discreetly within the links and the clasp. Satisfied, he handed it over to the proprietor. The man held the chain in his hands and closed his eyes, causing the chain to glow white for a second.

Handing it back to Harry, he said, 'this will keep you from being noticed should you choose it.' Harry nodded his thanks and put on the chain, which fit snugly around his neck Harry fingered it for awhile getting used to feeling the cool metal against his skin.

'There are limitations to this however, while you will be unnoticed by those around you, you will not be truly invisible. So if you do something that is highly suspicious or impressive, the charm will be rendered useless. Though it will come back into effect the minute you become incognito. Also, if a person who was specifically looking for you were to see you, you will have but a few minutes before they break the charm. But avoiding eye contact and possibly covering your face may keep you undetected.'

Pausing for a while to let his customer digest this, he continued 'You can however, still use magic and be unnoticed, as long as you are discrete about it and are not seen doing it blatantly. People will look at you but will not give you a second thought when the charm is in effect. Apparating out in front of a person will not break the charm as

long as it is done quietly, the same goes for Apparating in on a busy crowd.'

The man then picked up a similar bracelet, enchanted it and said, 'This will ensure that tracking charms cannot be placed on you without your consent. It will also block the ministry's sensors from picking up your magic. This will be on as long as you are wearing the bracelet, so you won't have to think about activating it.'

Harry put this on his right wrist. 'When the coolness wears off, they will be fully charged and attuned to your magical signature and can only be used and removed by you,.' said Alberich.

Harry thanked the man and left, around five hundred Galleons poorer, but extremely satisfied. He idly wondered why Alberich wasn't too suspicious about him entering his shop. Surely, a ring couldn't be the only identifying factor! Especially since what he was doing was illegal. Shrugging, Harry moved on, perhaps there was a Foe Glass or something in the back room or the Door was warded, he mused. At any rate he didn't really care, it was that man's headache as far as he was concerned. With that, Harry made his way to Diagon Alley, making a mental note to thank Gornuk for his recommendation.

Exiting Knockturn Alley, Harry immediately set off towards the Muggle world. The first thing on his mind was to get decent clothes. He wasn't sure how long the magically conjured clothes would last and did not want to suddenly find himself starkers in the middle of a busy street when they suddenly disappeared. He could already see the headlines that scene would cause; Boy-Who-Lived, becomes Boy-Who-Streaked, or Harry Potter Shows his Magic Wand, though The Boy-Who-Lied Bares All sounded like another possibility.

Shuddering, (was it his imagination or were his clothes feeling lighter?) he made for the Leaky Cauldron and the Muggle world. The fact that his cloak disappeared the minute he removed it only served to lengthen his strides.

Harry hurried down Charing Cross Road towards the Underground at Tottenham Court Road, where he had first gotten off with Hagrid. Certain that there was a clothes shop near there.

However, on reaching the station, he noticed with dismay that the clothes shop was now taken over by a music store.

Cursing his luck and trying not to panic, Harry furiously thought of a plan. He looked down the street and noticed an array of shops; perhaps he could walk down and find something?

Though, after passing a few cafes, a McDonalds, a pub (which did a marvellous job of reminding him that he was hungry) Harry's anxiety started to increase. Sure there were a few stores that sold clothes, but from what Harry could see from the outside, they looked rather girly. He briefly considered going into the Gap Store he had spotted across the road at one point, but one look at the mannequins outside disabused him of that notion, he wasn't that desperate ... yet...

Harry took a few deep breaths at this, trying to calm his thoughts. He cast his mind back six odd years trying to remember what that shop looked like. Suddenly, the store's name came to mind. Focusing on what the sign looked like, Harry felt confident that he could Apparate there directly.

Looking around at the busy street, he concentrated on becoming unnoticed. A shiver of magic ran down his neck, signalling that the charm had activated. The sudden decrease in the stares he was beginning to attract confirmed that theory.

Closing his eyes, and praying that it would work, Harry silently disappeared.

Opening his eyes, he found himself in front of a Debenhams. Looking around, he noticed that nobody had given him a second glance. Spotting a Muggle surveillance camera, he tensed up a bit before relaxing. He was certain that the charm would prevent Muggle cameras from noticing him while active.

Harry entered the store, and quickly made his way to the men's section, where he picked up a few random T-shirts and jeans that caught his fancy, and after some consideration, a pair of boxer shorts, barely giving a second glance to the designer labels on them.

Trying them on, he then paid for what he liked (after dropping the charm) and ducked back into the nearest trial room, where (after

removing the underpants from its packaging) he changed into his new clothes. And not a moment too soon as the conjured clothes along with his trainers disappeared, leaving his old glasses on the floor. Sighing in relief, he pocketed his glasses (idly noticing without much surprise that the ring was now missing) and walked out of the trial room.

He may have been barefoot, and the pair of black boxer shorts he had just bought may have outlines of aeroplanes in green on them, but at least his feet were the only part of him exposed. Well, that and the underwear, his new jeans were low waist and by a miracle of gravity were still on his hips leaving his bum almost fully exposed.

But Harry didn't mind, he rather liked his new clothes and actually felt comfortable, the t-shirt was also long enough to cover his underwear, so he didn't feel too exposed. Besides, judging by what he had seen so far, it seemed that displaying your pants for the world to see was completely acceptable. Though he made a mental note to get a belt, as he pulled up his slipping trousers for what felt like the nth time ... after getting a pair of trainers of course...

With that in mind, he headed to the footwear section. Attracting the attention of a salesman, he got his feet measured, and found to his surprise that he was now a size twelve. Looking around, he found a nice pair of black trainers adorned with what looked like white graffiti on the sides and a big DC at the back in his size. After trying them out, he indicated that he would like to wear them out.

The salesman smiled and said, 'Sure thing sir, I'll just pack your old shoes in then, shall I?' Looking around, he asked confusedly, 'Where are your shoes anyway?'

After a bit of an awkward pause, Harry had a brainwave; hoping this would work, he tried to bring his magic out by projecting an air of complete confidence and authority and said, 'You don't need to look for my old trainers.'

Harry was rewarded with success when he saw the salesman's face go blank as he repeated what Harry had said in a monotone. Pleased, Harry then continued saying, adding in a hand gesture he thought appropriate for good measure, 'You already have packed in my old trainers and will be selling these new ones free of charge by

paying for them out of your pay check. And then, you will forget all about this incident.'

Immediately, the man gave him the empty box with the spare pair of laces and said, 'Here you go, free of charge,' in a monotone, before wandering off, leaving a smirking Harry behind.

After paying for a few pairs of socks, and a wide leather belt with a big fancy buckle, Harry felt like a new man with his jeans firmly secured. Relaxing a bit, he browsed the store for a bit and basically bought himself a few more clothes, after all, he did like wearing new clothes of his own and he also had enough money to buy them. The fact that they were all designer labels, (and judging by the price tags on them) the height of fashion and would thus make Dudley really jealous was icing on the cake for Harry.

Harry also tested out and bought a few bottles of expensive perfume that caught his fancy. After all, why not smell good when you can more than afford it?

After spending close to a thousand quid, and discreetly shrinking the bags and placing them in his pocket, Harry walked out in search of a place to eat.

Spotting a Nando's nearby, he made his way over there. He had always wanted to try the food there after hearing his fat cousin rave about it once. Belly full of some really spicy chicken and excellent red wine that he had (literally) charmed the pretty waitress into selling him without asking questions, Harry activated the charms around his necklace an hour later and Apparated back to Diagon Alley.

Wasting no time, he quickly selected a few books on Duelling, Charms, Defence, and Transfiguration from Flourish and Blotts, and after some browsing, a book on stealth and eavesdropping. On his way to the till, he noticed a certain book he had coveted for nearly five years but hadn't seen the point in buying. Now, however, considering the changes that had occurred to him in the past few hours, Harry added the book to his sizeable pile grinning maliciously. Dudley was sure going to have an interesting summer this year...

Shrinking his purchases and noticing that it was nearly five, Harry quickly Apparated to Hogsmeade, and made his way to Hogwarts,

blending in with the mass of students making their way back by making use of his necklace, satisfied with the progress he had made so far, yet knowing that there was more work to be done.

Like it? Then please review ...

Don't like it? Review again! I don't mind constructive criticism

Don't like it but cannot find a good reason for not liking it? Well, then go cry in a corner!

I would apologise for the late update, but since I don't really have a schedule ... there really isn't much to apologise for ... at any rate, Real Life does take precedence!

A thank you to all you guys who have added this little story to your favourites and alerts list ... you stir something deep within me ... it's strange, but rather pleasant ... and a special thank you to FirePhoenix86 for really helping out! (her fic's rather good too!)

As Harry entered the grounds, he thought about what the goblins had said about Sirius' will and the chance he had given Harry of being considered his son by blood. He already knew that he was going through with the adoption, as it cemented in his mind that he was actually wanted by someone in that way. Harry never really had anyone caring for him while growing up. While he stayed with his aunt, she never did show that she cared for him. In fact, he was sure that she and her family hated him and his very existence with a passion. They had gone out of their way to ensure that he never felt accepted or was a part of their household when he was growing up with them, except as the domestic help (though, "slave" would be a more accurate term).

He never did remember his parents since they had died when he was really young. While he knew that they loved him, it wasn't the same as the actual experience. Mrs. Weasley had filled that gap somewhat, but she was his best mate's mother, and frankly domineering. She did not seem to understand that Harry was different from her children. In fact, she did not seem to understand Harry at all!

In short, Harry had grown up not understanding the feeling of belonging or being wanted. So it was a foregone conclusion that he would jump at the chance to feel that even for a moment. Never mind that his step-father was already dead. What mattered was that someone wanted him as his son and was willing to acknowledge it.

But the million Galleon question was: How fast could it be done?

Harry wanted it done as fast as possible, and he also did not want anybody to know until after the fact. So with that in mind, Harry decided that it should be done tonight in Hogwarts.

The ministry was in uproar because Fudge had finally seen that Harry and Dumbledore had been telling the truth, so whatever happened today would in all probability not be noticed. Fudge, also in his blind panic had done the one thing he was reputed for doing ever since he was elected; gone running to Dumbledore hoping for an easy fix. That meant that Dumbledore would be busy, and since Fudge would want him at hand, the headmaster would not be at school till perhaps next morning.

That would mean that Dumbledore would be distracted as well. Therefore, tonight would be the best time to carry that ritual out.

With that in mind, Harry started climbing the stairs towards Gryffindor Tower. He would first stow his purchases away in his trunk (especially that bottle of wine) before going to the Owlery and sending Hedwig to Gornuk and seeing if it was possible to set the ritual up later that night in Hogwarts.

However, as he had stashed his purchases in his trunk, he realised that it was getting rather late. He doubted that he would be able to send an owl in time to Gornuk. He wasn't sure if Gringotts had a closing time.

Then as he noticed a crumpled bit of parchment on the floor, it hit him; what better way to get a letter faster than by house-elf? Congratulating himself on his idea, Harry took his writing things out and penned a short note inquiring about the possibility of a meeting tonight to Gornuk.

But just before he could call Dobby, he was interrupted by Seamus and Dean who entered the dorm noisily.

Harry cursed silently; he didn't have the time to wait for them to leave, nor could he just call Dobby in front of them, he was a bit paranoid right now and did not want even an inkling of what he was about to do to come out. So after answering a few cursory questions, Harry hurried out of the dorm not particularly caring if he was being rude; he still hadn't fully forgiven Seamus.

Climbing out of the portrait, he set off at a brisk walk towards the Room of Requirement. Reaching the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy, he checked he was alone before calling out for Dobby.

With a crack the house-elf appeared. 'Harry Potter sir called Dobby! What can Dobby be doing for Sir?' said the overexcited house-elf.

Harry smiled at Dobby briefly before getting down to business, 'Dobby, can you do something for me and not tell anybody about it?'

Dobby looked even more excited by the prospect of helping Harry out than normal. The result of that was rather disturbing. If Harry didn't know better, he was sure that the house-elf would

spontaneously combust in excitement. Nodding rather vigorously, Dobby said, 'Oh yes sir! Dobby is being glad to help out Harry Potter! Dobby will keep Harry Potter's secrets he will, oh yes!'

Before the house-elf could start waxing lyrical about Harry's greatness and kindness, Harry hurriedly cut him off, 'Er that's great Dobby, I want you to just give this letter to Gornuk in Gringotts, he is my account manager.' With that, he took out the letter he had written and held it out to Dobby.

Dobby's large eyes became positively luminous at the prospect of being a courier for Harry. Positively vibrating in place with excitement he took the letter and babbled, 'Dobby will get this letter to Harry Potter's account manager immediately!'

'I expect that Gornuk will be replying, so could you wait for it?'

At this Dobby began to tear up, 'Harry Potter is asking Dobby if Dobby is wanting to do something for him! Harry Potter sir is too kind and great, treating Dobby as an equal! Don't worry sir, Dobby will be sending letter to Harry Potter sir's Goblin and will be waiting for reply.'

With that Dobby popped out with the letter. Harry chuckled; talking to Dobby was always an uplifting experience. He wondered what Gornuk would think at being called "Harry Potter's Goblin" ... the goblin might in all probability attack the elf with his bare hands. Harry doubted that he would need a weapon, those nails and teeth looked lethal enough. Harry wasn't too worried; he was pretty sure that Dobby could take care of himself, judging by what he had done to Lucius Malfoy all those years back. He wondered who would win in a fight...

Erasing his current thoughts of gladiatorial tournaments between House-elf and Goblin, Harry cleared his mind and paced in front of the room, picturing an office. Entering, he noted the large comfortable room with large windows in front of him, letting in the late evening summer sun onto a large mahogany desk situated in front of it. Behind the desk was one of those high backed leather swivel chairs that Harry had seen once before.

Sinking into the comfortable chair, Harry let out a groan of pleasure as the chair practically moulded itself to him.

He had just gotten comfortable when Dobby popped back in holding a scroll of parchment and two folders. Placing these on the desk Dobby stepped back and asked, 'Is there anything else you is needing sir?'

Harry stopped spinning the chair upon Dobby's entrance and (slightly dizzy) took the scroll saying, 'Not right now thanks Dobby. You are a life saver! If there is anything you need, don't hesitate to ask and if it's within my power I will help you.'

'Dobby is glad to be helping the good and kind Harry Potter!' said Dobby, bowing deeply till his nose was nearly touching the ground. Straightening, Dobby looked a bit apprehensive as if he wanted to ask Harry something.

'Is everything alright Dobby?'

'Dobby is fine sir! But-' Dobby broke off nervously as if dreading Harry's response to what he was about to say, 'Tis the other elves sir, Dobby knows not how to say-'

'Are they giving you trouble Dobby?' Harry said, concerned for the little elf. Despite his hyperactivity and penchant for having potentially lethal ideas for saving his life, Harry had gotten attached to the elf, and could not bear seeing him in trouble. 'They aren't hurting you or anything, are they?'

'Oh no sir, they is not giving Dobby any trouble sir! They may not be liking that Dobby is getting paying sir or that Dobby is wearing clothes. But they is not hurting Dobby, they leaves Dobby alone and lets Dobby get on with his work.'

'Oh, then what is the problem?' said a relieved Harry. Frankly he had no idea what he would have done if the elves had actually been abusing Dobby. Truth to be told, the little buggers could be rather scary. Harry had seen firsthand what an angry elf could do if given incentive and had no desire in being at the receiving end, thank you very much.

'Actually sir, some elves are being in trouble. Dobby is wanting to help them, but is not knowing how,' said the elf haltingly. 'So Dobby

is wondering if Harry Potter is being able to help,' the elf looked hopeful as he completed his statement.

Intrigued, Harry said, 'Sure thing Dobby, I will see what can be done. I will need some time though.' He pointed to the folder. 'Perhaps I can meet you in the kitchens in an hour or so?' he said, hoping that he wasn't about to get in over his head.

'Dobby is not expecting Harry Potter sir to be helping! Sir is truly kind and good! Dobby will be telling the other elves the good news now,' saying that, the house-elf disappeared with a loud crack.

Smiling, Harry turned his attention to the scroll. Opening it, he began to read:

Dear, Mr. Potter,

We recognise the urgency of conducting the ritual and agree that the date and the venue would be ideal in this situation. Ergo, Grimjaw and I will be conducting and witnessing the ritual. Please meet us outside the haunted structure in Hogsmeade at Nine PM tonight. Also, I have included the total holdings of both the families that you are shortly going to be Head of for you to study at your leisure.

Yours Faithfully,

Gornuk

Harry opened the folders to find a list of all the properties that he owned. From the Potter file he noted that aside from one or two small holiday homes found in various exotic locations, along with the house in Godric's Hollow, he owned townhouses in London and Edinburgh as well as the Potter Ancestral home which for all intents and purposes sounded like a small castle located in an unplottable section of Holy Island in Wales surrounded by large tracts of farmland. There was a small magical settlement nearby (it was too small to be called a village) and was named after the muggle town of Holyhead. Harry also saw that he owned the local Quidditch team and a stadium there too. Other properties were mainly small business premises in Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade, as well as plantations in Africa, Asia and South America, and a Dragon Reserve in Romania.

From the Black Family was Black Isle located at the south of England a few miles off Plymouth. It too had a castle which was slightly larger than the Potter one surrounded by an even larger farmland, with a decent sized village nearby. Other properties included a large mansion located in Fairy's Glen in Skye as well as Grimmauld Place in London. Aside from that, there were a few vineyards found in France, a few plantations in the Caribbean and what looked like a good portion of Knockturn Alley.

Harry also noted that both families had (curiously enough) large tobacco plantations.

Harry set aside that for the moment, taking note to ask Gornuk about that later. Checking the time with a quick Tempus, he noted that it was half past five.

Harry shrunk and pocketed the files and made his way to the kitchens, wondering what was troubling Dobby.

As he turned the handle that appeared after tickling the pear in the painting of the fruit-bowl, he was greeted by the undivided attention of five slightly drunk elves wearing vaguely familiar woollen hats. Looking around Harry noticed that they were surrounded by the other elves that were looking at him with suspicion and a little fear.

'What is going on?' asked Harry looking at them with trepidation and a bit of bemusement (the five elves did look a bit funny tottering around like that).

The sober elves muttered to each other before one of them stepped forward and said in a rather accusatory tone, 'You is one of them you is! Tally has seen youse with her!' she shuddered at the last word, causing the other elves to gasp and shrink away from Harry as if he were carrying some disease.

'Who?' asked Harry nonplussed, wondering what was going on.

'You-Know-Who!' wailed Tally

'Voldemort? Why would I be with him? Besides, he's a he, not a she,' replied Harry exasperated.

'No, not He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named,' said Tally with uncharacteristic impatience after the customary flinching at Voldemort's name, 'We house-elves is not being so afraid of him no more! Not now that we have met...her!' said Tally whispering the last word with venom. 'She is more terrible and evil than He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. She is ...The Clothes Maker,' said Tally, looking left and right. The other house-elves shuddered as one and started looking around as if afraid that they might be suddenly attacked by some unknown force.

Bewildered, Harry found himself looking around as well before he could stop himself. Whoever this person was, she seemed to have terrified the elves even more than Voldemort, especially since they seemed to be afraid of even using the moniker they had given her. He cast his eyes to the elves at the centre and noticed that they looked rather woebegone.

'What happened to them?' he said, indicating the five elves.

'They is being affected by ... her,' said Tally whispering the last word.

Harry looked again at those elves; the hats they were wearing looked familiar...

'Hang on, are you talking about Hermione?' said Harry incredulously, finally recognising the elves were wearing Hermione's earliest creations.

Upon hearing her name, the elves all clapped their hands over their ears and started shrieking in distress, their high pitched voices so loud and tiny that they seemed to lance through Harry's ears and pierce his brain literally bringing him to his knees.

'Alright, alright, calm down! I won't mention her name again!' he shouted struggling to be heard over their frantic voices.

'SHUT UP!' he bellowed, throwing his hands up. In his desperation, he caused fireworks to come out of his hand with a blast like a cannon which finally silenced the hysterical elves. Harry took a moment to look at his hand in wonderment in the ringing silence before addressing the elves.

'Okay, now tell me what Her-She has done that you are so afraid of her,' said Harry stopping himself from saying Hermione's name at the last minute when he saw the elves ready to start off again.

Dobby took this moment to pop into existence, his colourful clothes contrasting with the whites of the other Hogwarts Elves. Finally spotting an elf that seemed to be the most sane at the moment (and that wasn't saying much) a relieved Harry directed his next question to him, 'Dobby, what the bloody hell is going on here?' he said gesturing at the other elves.

Dobby looked around and came closer to Harry causing Harry to crouch to his level. He said in a low voice that would not be heard by the elves surrounding them, 'It's Harry Potter's 'Rangy sir. She has been upsetting the other elveses by giving them clothes'

'Hang on I thought that the situation was resolved already at the beginning.'

'You see sir,' began Dobby nervously, 'They is no longer being Hogwarts' house-elves since Harry Potter's 'Rangy freed them.'

'Wait, how is Hermione giving them clothes freeing them? I mean, you guys do the students' laundry as well ...' said Harry.

'Oh no sir, house-elves can pick up dirty clothes left around. They can only be freed when their master personally hands them clothes. Missus 'Rangy made clothes for elves and left them under rubbish for them to find as a gift. This made the elves free when they picked them up sir.'

'Oh,' said Harry slowly cottoning on. 'So what you are saying is that to free an elf, you need to gift or personally hand them clothes?' Seeing Dobby nod he continued, 'So why don't they leave and find another place to work?'

'Well sir, they is still being bound to the castle even if they is being freed from service sir. Unless they find another master they cannot leave the castle without permission from the headmaster,' said Dobby. 'And Headmaster Dumbledore was being too busy to talk to us house-elves sir.' He continued looking slightly crestfallen.

Harry understood what they were feeling all too well. Besides, it wasn't as if Umbridge would deign to listen to them either. Suddenly seeing where this was going, he said, 'Is this what you wanted me to help you with Dobby?'

Dobby looked up at him hopefully. 'Dobby is hoping that the great Harry Potter could talk to Professor Dumbledore and help them sir,' he said waving his hand at the five elves.

Harry really had no desire of speaking to Dumbledore again, especially not so soon. Thinking a bit he said, 'The elves are bound to the school till they find a master and cannot leave the castle to find one as they haven't been given permission by the headmaster.'

'Yes Harry Potter sir,' said Dobby nodding,

'But what if they find a master without leaving the castle; will they no longer be bound to the castle?' Upon receiving another nod from Dobby, Harry asked curiously. 'Why do they need a master anyway Dobby?'

'House-elves like being bound to wizards and working for them sir,' interjected Tally who until then had been pretending that she hadn't been eavesdropping into the conversation. 'We likes to serve. Besides, wizard magic makes us stronger. Not that she understands,' she added, the waspish tone sounding out of place on her small body. She muttered to herself much to Harry's amusement, 'Tally tried and tried to make her understand, but she never listens.'

'I may have a solution for them then,' Harry stood up to address the other elves looking on curiously in general and the five house-elves in particular. 'It has been brought to my notice that you five elves have been freed from service by the tyrannical Clothes Maker,' he paused as they winced, 'and are looking for new masters to work for. Well, I am going to be inheriting new homes soon and will need elves to keep them habitable and carry out repairs. Will you be willing to work for me?' Harry reckoned that he would need some elves to help with the upkeep of his properties as he didn't know how many he had. Besides, house-elves were dead useful and he was not about to pass up the chance to have five of them!

Harry suddenly found his legs being attacked by five very grateful (and still drunk) elves who were breaking into paroxysms of joy and

expressing their undying gratitude while their employed colleagues had either burst into happy tears or were joyfully dancing and praising "the Great and Generous Harry Potter."

Perhaps the glass of wine that he had earlier at lunch was stronger than what he was used to or perhaps Harry was still high over the illicit nature of the trip that he had taken and what he had done and was about to do under Dumbledore's and the Ministry's nose. But whatever it was, Harry found himself actually enjoying having the elves heap praises on him and revelling in the attention being given to him whereas he would have normally blushed with embarrassment in the past.

Amidst all this celebration, Harry noticed that Dobby seemed to be a bit unhappy. It didn't take much of a genius to figure out what the matter was with him, 'Do you want to work for me as well Dobby?'

At this, Dobby's expression changed to one of incredulous joy, 'Dobby would be honoured to be working for the Great Harry Potter. Dobby has also been wanting to be Harry Potter's elf for ages!'

'Very well, how much would you want as a salary?'

'Dobby is not wanting paying anymore, not that he is now working for the Good and Kind Harry Potter sir!'

Surprised at this, Harry crouched down to Dobby's level again, 'What about being free and earning wages? I thought that it was what you really wanted ...' Harry's voice trailed off at the end questioningly.

'Dobby enjoyed being a free elf for awhile, but Dobby has grown tired of it. Dobby is now ready to settle down with a nice family,' said Dobby gravely.

'Well Dobby were you anybody else, I probably would have taken that the wrong way. But since it's you ... welcome to the family!' said Harry gesturing grandly. Dobby was the icing on the cake, Harry somehow found that he liked the elf, he really was a great ego booster; what with the way he kept going on and on about how great Harry was. Harry supposed that he could keep Dobby as his personal house elf.

Harry shook himself out of those thoughts and addressed all six of his soon to be house-elves. 'I will come down tomorrow and we can set up the bonding ceremony then. It will give you a chance to clean up and stuff. Now, I am feeling a bit peckish, so dinner would be nice.' As he said this, his stomach growled loudly.

At once the elves got busy and before he could blink Harry found himself seated at a table with a large spread of all his favourites. Harry dug in, feeling ravenously hungry despite the large lunch that he had partaken in. He was barely able to stagger out of the kitchens later on due to the amount of food he had eaten. The elves had definitely gone all out to show their gratitude for saving them and their way of life. They had even given him a large helping of the best treacle tart he had ever tasted.

Feeling good about himself, Harry checked the time at the nearest available magical clock (he really needed to get a wristwatch for himself) and found that it was nearing nine. Cursing, Harry bolted towards the grounds, putting on his Invisibility Cloak that he had the foresight to take with him and wrapping it around himself. He also activated the charms around his necklace as an added precaution.

However, he did not encounter anybody on his way outside. He slipped out through the main doors and out into the dying rays of sunlight. Making his way to the Whomping Willow, he froze the tree by prodding the knot and slipped inside.

Emerging out in the Shrieking Shack, Harry removed his cloak and made his way outside to the front of the house. Coming outside, he spied the two Goblins who had just arrived with a flash of light.

'Good evening Gornuk, Grimjaw,' said Harry approaching the two goblins, 'Shall we get on with it then?'

'Indeed Mr. Potter, lead the way,' said Gornuk.

Harry led them back into the shack to their (well hidden) surprise. Pressing the knot on the tree, he led the two out into the Hogwarts grounds. Grimjaw said doubtfully, 'I hope you have a suitable place set up for the ritual Mr. Potter? This ritual is complex after all.'

Harry just smirked and said, 'Follow me just ensure that you are not seen.' With that, he slipped the cloak on. Before they moved on,

Gornuk said, 'May I cast a tracking charm on you Mr. Potter? I presume that I would need your permission,' he said leadingly. 'After all, we won't be able to see each other since we will be invisible.' Unseen by the goblins Harry nodded, he hadn't thought of that and was glad somebody had.

'Go ahead,' he said, feeling a tingle of magic emanating from his wrist indicating his consent. Gornuk waved his hand and paused, a troubled expression on his face. Seeing this, Harry uncovered his head and said, 'Is something the matter?'

Frowning, Gornuk said, 'I tried to place the tracking charm on you but it has failed for some reason. Are you sure that any tracking charms I cast can be placed on you?'

Nodding Harry said, 'I felt the magic signalling the device's acceptance of my instructions.'

Gornuk tried casting the charm again, 'Interesting, it works now that you have uncovered your head. I think that the cloak has been blocking any spells that I cast on you. If that indeed is the case and that cloak is indeed what I think it is, then I suggest that you keep that cloak safe. Its value has gone up considerably.'

Harry nodded and covered his head while the goblins placed Disillusionment Charms on themselves. The invisible party then headed towards the castle. Harry then proceeded to lead them up towards the Seventh Floor. The two goblins looked at their surroundings with expressions of open interest. Not that Harry could see that.

Harry stopped at the tapestry and removed his cloak causing the goblins to drop their charms as well. 'This area is a bit small for the ritual Mr. Potter' said Grimjaw in a sceptical tone.

Instead of answering Harry just paced in front of the wall. Just as they were beginning to get concerned about his mental health, a door appeared in front of the goblins out of nowhere to their shock.

Smirking at the reactions he had incited in the normally collected creatures, Harry opened the door and said dryly, 'Will this be enough gentlemen?'

Gobsmacked, the goblins numbly stepped through the door and saw a high ceilinged room with two concentric runic circles with a large but shallow circular basin in the middle made of what the goblins found to be a highly magical and rare form of platinum.

Recovering quickly from their shock, the goblins turned to Harry and nodded. 'This room more than suits our purposes Mr. Potter. In fact, loathe as I am to admit this, it is even better than the ritual room that we use in Gringotts.' Said Grimjaw, 'and we spent billions of Galleons and two years worth of labour to get ours done,' he muttered to himself.

'It seems that Mr. Potter has managed to escape from incurring extra expenses,' said Gornuk in a slightly disappointed tone. 'In fact it's Gringotts who would end up paying to use this room, a lot of goblins would kill just to be able to see this room!' he continued in awe. Realising that Harry had heard what he had just said, both the goblins shut their mouths with an audible snap.

Harry just grinned and said, 'It looks like the both of us benefit from this venture then. Your discretion and time for a once in a lifetime opportunity to use the best ritual room you have ever seen for free! The bragging rights you will have with the other goblins can be considered an added bonus.'

'It looks like you have the makings of a fine businessman Mr. Potter,' said Grimjaw sardonically. 'You will make for an interesting client.'

Then the goblins quickly got down to business. Grimjaw took out the vial of blood he had shown Harry earlier while Gornuk took out a piece of parchment and gave to Harry to sign saying 'This shows that the ritual has been conducted and that you are fully aware of its consequences and are willingly taking part in it. We will be taking care of the location later on,' Gornuk finished with a smirk.

After Harry signed Grimjaw spoke in a businesslike tone. 'Very well, Mr. Potter, as you are the main subject of this ritual, you will have to enter the circle just as yourself. That means no possessions on your body ... including clothes,' he ended with a smirk.

Blushing, Harry removed the necklace and bracelet before stripping down to his newly bought pants with the aeroplane outlines on them (the jeans fell down to his ankles almost immediately when he

unbuckled his belt). He tried to act natural and ignore Gornuk's amused expression as he watched Grimjaw removed the stopper and poured half the contents of the vial of Sirius' blood into the basin chanting under his breath in a strange language. Harry noted that the vial definitely contained more than a litre of blood.

As Grimjaw finished, Harry slowly lowered his pants and at Grimjaw's signal lay down spread-eagled partially submerged in the blood, trying not to choke on the smell or think of whom the blood once belonged to.

Grimjaw then proceeded to draw strange runes all over Harry's body with the remaining blood, all the while chanting softly in a guttural language. He had some difficulty at the ribs and feet (Harry was rather ticklish there) and at the crotch (Harry was male and fifteen), but it was nothing he couldn't handle.

Gornuk then said, 'We are now conducting a ritual to adopt Harry James Potter into the house of Black. He is to be adopted by the previous heir of House Black, Sirius Black and will inherit the headship of the Black name and will be considered a full member of the family. After this ritual he shall be known as Harry James Potter-Black.'

With this Grimjaw started to trace the other runes in the two concentric circles with the last of the blood. Finishing, the two goblins started to chant a bit louder.

Magic started building as the goblins finished chanting, forming a dome around Harry. Seeing this, the goblins slipped out of the room, Gornuk leaving a note on Harry's clothes. They had played their part, now everything was left to Harry.

As the magic grew, Harry initially felt the blood in the runes painted on his body evaporate. He noticed that the red colour had changed to a deep luminous blue, which he supposed was magic. He then felt the blood beneath him slowly creep up to cover his body while at the same time feeling a stinging pain across his front as he saw his own blood leak out of and pool around the runes drawn mixing with Sirius' blood. As this was happening, Harry thought of Sirius and the times they had spent together. He tried to distract himself from feeling the pain by focusing on his feelings for Sirius.

As Harry's heart filled with emotion for the second time in a day, the dome of magic above him gained a golden hue, as the effects of the ritual became enhanced by the love Harry felt towards Sirius. This was something rarely seen and made the filial bond between Harry and Sirius even stronger: Something that would be seen much later when Harry would do an inheritance test at Gringotts.

As Harry slowly lost consciousness, the blood in the basin was absorbed into his body. As the last drop disappeared into his body, the ritual came to its full conclusion, the runic circles disappeared and the room became barren leaving only the unmarked nude body of a peacefully sleeping wizard formerly known as Harry Potter and his things.

A special thanks to FirePhoenix86 for helping me with the chapter!

And a thank you to the people who like this story so far ... you know who you are!

Harry woke up the next morning feeling refreshed. Looking at his state of undress reminded him of his ritual. Wanting to see what he looked like, he thought of a mirror. As one appeared, he stepped up to it and studied his body closely.

He hadn't paid special attention to his reflection the day before when he had gone shopping since he was in a hurry to get clothes, which is why he was surprised to find quite a few changes on his body; beyond the glaringly obvious improvement in his height and eyesight, the slight musculature he had acquired through years of physical activity had improved slightly gaining some definition (he was pretty happy with the six pack he was now sporting). All the scars on his body (and they were numerous) had also disappeared, the only exceptions being the scar left from the Basilisk fang, which had faded somewhat, though he wasn't too unhappy with that (it was a souvenir of an epic battle with a basilisk after all-which he had won by the way) and he was more than pleased that the marks on the back of his hand (a by-product of the numerous detentions with that sadistic toad Umbridge) had completely disappeared leaving unmarked skin.

Bolstered by this, Harry eagerly lifted his fringe to see if his lightning bolt scar had gone as well. He was disappointed to know that the scar still remained, though it no longer looked inflamed. In fact, it had thinned out and faded somewhat, looking very much like a regular scar.

Other than that, Harry was puzzled that there wasn't much in the way of physical changes. He expected that the adoption ritual would have done something like that, but his eyes were still the same shade of green, his hair still jet black and unruly, and his nose the same shape.

Turning around, Harry went to get dressed. As he pulled on his clothes, he saw a piece of parchment fall out. Picking it up, he opened it to read.

Dear Mr. Potter,

By the time you are reading this, the ritual would have reached its completion. If the ritual has succeeded (and I am sure it would have) then you should have woken up to find no trace of the blood used on your person or in the surroundings. The runes drawn on you should

fade within a few days, after which the physical changes will take place. Within a month or so, you will start to notice some of the physical characteristics of your adoptive parent. They will be slight, but noticeable if you know where to look. After this, you may start to exhibit some of the other traits found in the Black Family. Those will be further discussed when you later come to Gringotts.

Thus, Grimjaw and I have come to the conclusion that you should visit us on the eve of your sixteenth birthday for your heritage test and to legally record your name as Harry James Potter-Black (or any other name of your choosing). As Gringotts will be open twenty four hours a day and seven days a week, you can be assured that you will find entry into our establishment should you choose to come in at an odd time. Though a word of caution; some of our nightly customers are usually those who are active at such times to avoid detection if you know what I mean. It would be in your best interest to come in disguised. You would not look out of place with a hooded black cloak.

Yours faithfully,

Gornuk

Well this explains everything, thought Harry. He was slightly confused that the rune markings had already faded completely. Resolving to ask Gornuk about this later, he headed to the Dorms for a much needed bath.

After bathing, Harry put on a fresh set of his new clothes. As he was getting dressed, he suddenly noticed his glasses lying in the trunk. He figured that people would notice if he no longer needed his glasses. After all, that would be noticeable and it wasn't something that Harry could hide or explain away at the moment. His height had increased only by an inch or so and was hidden under the loose clothes that he had specifically chosen so wouldn't be as noticeable as his glasses.

Harry mentally cursed himself for not thinking about it. He was lucky that McGonagall hadn't twigged him, he supposed that having just returned from St. Mungo's had helped somewhat. He also had not given Dean and Seamus much of a chance to look at him properly since he was already on his way out when they had come in.

Stopping for the moment, Harry took his wand out and Vanished the lenses in his glasses. He concentrated and conjured a fresh pair of plain clear lenses with no prescription into the frame. He was gratified to notice that the lenses had materialised properly and easily (transfiguration hadn't always been a strong suit for him).

Harry placed his sort of new glasses on his face feeling the familiar weight back on his nose and walked out of the dorms.

He noticed that it was late in the morning, meaning that the others would be out in the Great Hall having lunch. Harry also realised with a start that by now everybody would have read the Daily Prophet and by now know the full truth. And more importantly, the fact that he was in the middle of it. He also realised with apprehension that there might be a lot of people wandering about in the castle since it was a Sunday.

Harry reckoned that they would not be specifically searching for him and so activated his necklace again and walked out into the common room with trepidation. He was glad to find that nobody paid him any attention. He quickly got moving as he was sure that he would be noticed if he stayed still for too long. Moving out of the portrait hole he walked leisurely towards the kitchens revelling in the anonymity that the chain was affording him.

As he entered the kitchens, he remembered the promise he had made to six elves as five slightly hung over elves and one over hyper Dobby all swarmed him within minutes of noticing him. Smiling bemusedly at them, Harry noticed a seventh slightly hung over elf. 'Is there something I can help you with Winky?' he asked the elf.

Winky's eyes moistened at Harry asking her that question before saying hopefully, 'Winky heard tell that Harry Potter is looking for good house-elves, and was going to take Dobby and five others. Winky be wondering if Harry Potter wanted another elf as well.' She looked at Harry with large hopeful eyes.

Oh lovely, bond five get two free! Thought Harry sardonically before immediately squashing those thoughts; house-elves were dead useful after all, and he did have a lot of properties in his name, so the more the merrier as far as he was concerned. 'Do you want to be bonded to me?' he asked.

Winky immediately brightened up and looking disturbingly like a tomato shaped nose female version of Dobby said, 'Yes! Yes Harry Potter Sir! I is being the bestest house-elf ever I is!' She either ignored or didn't notice the disdainful and challenging looks from the other five elves and the slightly murderous look in Dobby's eyes.

Harry looked at the byplay with interest. It looks like Dobby and Winky won't be getting together anytime soon ... unless they are the elfish version of Ron and Hermione ... No! Bad Image, Bad Image! Shaking his head of disturbing thoughts of ginger and bushy headed elves, Harry said as instructed by the elves, 'I Harry James Potter-Black do hereby take the house-elves Willy, Nilly, Dilly, Dally, Twinky, Dobby and Winky into the Houses of Black and Potter. So mote it be.' He felt a good deal of pleasure upon adding his godfather's surname. As soon as he said this, the seven elves' motley collection of clothing was replaced by tea-towel togas adorned with a shield divided diagonally with what Harry recognised as the Potter and Black crests adorning the upper left and right sections.

Harry didn't trust himself to say anything currently as he was sure that he had sprained a rib or two trying not to laugh at the elves' names. He really wasn't sure how he had managed to say those names together with a straight face. He supposed this was mainly why Amos Diggory avoided enunciating their names as much as possible. There really isn't any way you can say 'Winky' and sound stern and commanding at the same time.

Harry also noticed that the elves actually looked happier than they had been before. They certainly didn't seem that depressed any more. Even Dobby looked happier than Harry had seen him before, if that was in any way possible.

Harry got down to business, 'Right, I don't really have anything for you to do right now, I will call you a little later on and give you your instructions.' The elves nodded and disappeared as Harry sat down to eat a large English breakfast.

After he had finished, Tally came up to him and asked what Harry planned to do about Hermione and her freeing elves against their own will. Harry said that he would think about it and will have a plan by the beginning of the next academic year. 'Besides, it's not like she will have the time to do anything for the next few days since she

is in the hospital wing,' he said. Appeased, Tally and the other elves went back to work in better spirits.

Harry supposed that it would be a good time to go and visit his friends in the hospital wing now. He supposed that Ron and Hermione would be awake by now. Though he was concerned for Luna Neville and Ginny, he wasn't as worried because realistically speaking, they had suffered minor injuries. Though with the way Madame Pomfrey was, Harry supposed that they would only be released today.

So with that in mind, Harry set off towards the hospital wing.

Upon entering, he saw Neville coming out of the bathroom fully dressed.

'Alright mate?' Harry asked tentatively. He didn't know how Neville would be around him, he had led them into a trap after all which had led to a confrontation with the woman who had driven his parents insane. Harry did recognise that it wasn't his fault that Neville had ended up fighting for his life; he and the others had followed him voluntarily despite Harry's objections and warnings of the dangers.

He needn't have to worry as Neville greeted him with a smile on his face, 'Hey Harry, it's good to see you again. I hadn't seen you yesterday and I was getting worried-'

'I'm fine Neville,' said Harry with an airy wave of his hand, 'In fact I've never felt better. I'm sorry I didn't come yesterday but I had ... things ... to deal with and wasn't really in the mood to see Madame Pomfrey.' He said a bit haltingly, before adding with a half smile and a faux cheery tone, 'And I was afraid of stepping out and doing anything. It's going to be the first time in my Hogwarts career that I haven't ended up in the hospital wing and I don't really want to jinx it!'

'True that,' Neville chuckled

'How are you Neville?' said Harry in a serious tone. Neville had taken a Cruciatus curse and Harry knew that it wasn't a picnic, (and factoring in Harry's high tolerance for pain, that was saying something) so he was worried about Neville's reaction as it was his first dose of that particular curse or of any substantial pain after all.

'I'm alright,' said Neville easily, 'Pomfrey fixed my nose in a jiffy. She did dose me with dreamless sleep as well as a pain relief potion though.' He added with a wince, 'In fact I only just got discharged.'

As he said that, the aforementioned nurse materialised, 'Mr Potter, I was wondering when you would be gracing the hospital wing this year.' She advanced towards Harry, her wand raised. 'What have you got yourself into this time?'

Before she could start casting, Harry interrupted her hastily, 'It's nothing, honest! I only came to visit my friends. Where are Ginny and Luna?' He looked around the room searching for them. He spied Ron and Hermione lying on beds not very far away.

The kindly matron looked faintly surprised. 'Well that's a first,' she muttered. Noticing where he was looking, she said, 'Miss Weasley and Miss Lovegood are fine. Nothing a spell and some bed rest couldn't cure. These two however,' she waved in the direction where Ron and Hermione were sleeping, 'Were a bit tricky. They should be awake in a few moments in fact.'

At that, Ginny and Luna emerged from the privacy screens at the end of the room fully clothed. Harry greeted them nervously; while Neville seemed to be fine with things, he had no idea what Ginny and Luna were feeling about being in the ministry. Ginny was a redhead, and judging by his ginger best friend, Harry reckoned that his sister would be just about as volatile and temperamental as her older brother. And as for Luna; the less said the better. The girl was as predictable and easy to read as Trelawney's tea leaves.

Again, Harry found his apprehension to be unfounded as both girls greeted him cheerily (and in Luna's case, dreamily).

After assuring each other that they were well, the four sat down around the still sleeping members of their gang. Harry sat down on the bed opposite Ron's while the girls and Neville sat in chairs around. 'So what happened to Ron that made him so loopy?' asked Harry. From what he could make out of his friend that wasn't covered by the blankets, Ron's arms were covered in bandages.

'Oh, like I said before, we were in this room full of planets where Ron was hit in the back with what I think was a strong Confundus charm,' said Luna airily as if she was discussing the weather.

'I think it was Jugson who hit him,' interjected Ginny, 'as for the brains ... well, according to Madame Pomfrey, they have attacked him with a physical manifestation of thoughts. She reckons that beside the welts, there should be no damage.'

'Hermione was a bit tricky though,' said Neville again. 'According to Pomfrey, the curse Dolohov hit her with caused a lot of damage. She says that it was lucky that he was silenced otherwise the spell would have been lethal.'

Harry digested this in. Then looking curiously at Luna he said, 'What are you doing here? Were you hurt too?'

'I am fine, thank you Harry,' said Luna with a smile. 'Madame Pomfrey wanted to make sure of that, so she stuck me in a bed for the day.' Harry rolled his eyes at the over protectiveness of the matron only to quickly smooth his face as the matron came in.

At the same time, Ron and Hermione started to come back to awareness. The matron first attended to Hermione, after checking on her, she handed her a bevy of potions to drink. Instructing Neville to ensure that they were all drunk, she turned her attention to Ron.

After checking on him and finding nothing wrong with him beyond the welts that he had on his arms, Madame Pomfrey removed the bandages and started applying a large amount of a foul smelling ointment.

Her work done, Madame Pomfrey left for her office. Harry smiled on seeing his two oldest and best friends up and on the road to recovery.

An hour later as he was exiting from the hospital wing, he wasn't smiling anymore. He really should have expected it after all. After reading the Sunday Prophet, Hermione had spent little to no time at all in finding out what had happened after she had lost consciousness and even lesser time after that hounding Harry about how he felt about the whole thing. Harry did understand that she had

just found out about it, but it really wasn't her business. He was thankful that Luna had managed to distract her so that he could make his escape ... he wondered if the air of dottiness that she put up was an act.

But what really troubled Harry was when he was talking to them, he could somehow read Hermione's thoughts the minute she met his eyes. He didn't really know how that happened, but the galling fact was that she actually seemed smug about being right even though she was trying to hide it!

Now confused and bothered, Harry decided to go into the grounds to think. As he walked out into the hot summer sun, he headed to a secluded spot near the lake that he had discovered a while back. He was greeted by many students on the way holding copies of the Sunday Prophet as if to say that they all believed him all along or that they had decided that like the Daily Prophet, that he wasn't a deranged attention seeking liar after all.

Had this happened a few days back, Harry would have been more than happy to finally have everybody believe him and not think of him as a raving lunatic. Now, he could care less. This year had taught him that the public could be very fickle.

As Harry sat down behind some bushes looking toward the lake, hidden from view, he started reviewing what he had done so far in the last two days. He really couldn't believe that it was that long. That just yesterday early morning he had come back from a fight to the death. That Sirius had died ... Harry wiped the tears from his eyes. He couldn't really wrap his head around the fact that Sirius had actually died and so he had trouble feeling the grief he knew he should be feeling. He suspected that he would have a wonderful breakdown very soon, but it wouldn't be for a while yet.

He then thought about the happenings in Diagon Alley and in Muggle London as well. He wondered how he had managed to Apparate. He hadn't Apparated before at all; that too wandlessly. And speaking of wandless, had he actually managed to quiet the elves by shooting fireworks without a wand? Then again, that wasn't the first time. He didn't have a wand in his hand when he had cast that Lumos last summer when the Dementors had attacked. He distinctly remembered that he wasn't touching his wand at that time.

Then there was how calm he was feeling. He had trouble in the past controlling his emotions, so how had he managed to stay in control? Come to think of it, his mind felt rather organised and structured. Something he imagined he would feel if he was a master at Occlumency.

Harry sifted through his recent memories that to his surprise were catalogued and clear. He also noticed that they were all catalogued from after the possession incident at the ministry...

And then it hit him; the vision he had seen while being possessed and the black smoke coming out from his scar. Could it be that he had somehow unknowingly absorbed Voldemort's memories and knowledge?

Harry had to test this theory out; so he screwed his face up trying to remember something of Voldemort's memories. But he was disappointed as all he got was a few disjointed fragments. He then tried to see if he could bring up the shield that he had seen Voldemort make during the duel against Dumbledore to see if he had Voldemort's knowledge. Harry could get a vague feeling that he knew the name of the spell that would bring it up, but for the life of him could not remember the incantation. It was like it was on the tip of his tongue, just out of reach.

Frustrated, Harry gave up. He couldn't even remember the theory behind Apparition or Occlumency save knowing how to do each. He supposed he could also do Legilimency but would have to test that theory out. He had a feeling that he had invariably done it with Hermione, but that event was too random to be counted. After all, it could have been a figment of his imagination.

Harry sighed in defeat and not a little disappointment. He supposed that he would have to build his spell repertoire on his own after all. It really was a shame, but he supposed that getting all of Voldemort's knowledge would have been too easy.

He decided to look on the positive side of things. He actually felt light as if a great burden and strain on his magic had been removed, a strain he had no idea that he was bearing all these years. He also felt a closer connection to his magic. And on top of it he had never felt so good physically. There was a distinct lack of a sort of tiredness that he had felt all these years without knowing it.

Harry then turned his thoughts to the prophecy that Dumbledore had oh so graciously deigned to share with him. He was a marked man, and had been so ever since he was born. He supposed he should feel angry with Trelawney, but he knew that it wasn't her fault. She was only the messenger. It was Voldemort and Dumbledore who had decided that the prophecy had meaning.

And speaking of Dumbledore, Harry was angry that Dumbledore hadn't done anything to prepare him for this destiny. Why hadn't he been given some type of training? In his humble opinion, Harry was rather powerful. After all, he had cast a Corporeal Patronus at the age of thirteen. Though come to think of it, he was rather average in his classes. His marks weren't anything great; sure in another world, they would be something to talk about, but they really weren't enough. Harry never had seen the need to apply himself in class. He supposed that it was a habit that he had gained from the Dursleys. They never really liked it when he had performed better than Dudley, so he was forced to underperform to make their oaf of a son look smarter. That had become a habit, Harry realised with a jolt. And his friends hadn't really helped at all.

Ron was always slacking off, and Harry supposed (with a little jealousy) that it was all well and good for him since he didn't have an insane Dark Lord after him. No, Ron would get to live a life that was going to be as stress free and as normal as possible. And Hermione while smart and driven to be the best was too much of a fanatic. So much so that Harry actually dreaded studying with her to the point of not wanting to study much at all. Her methods of studying really did not suit Harry; she depended too much on her text books. Though he did listen to her now and then ... she did make some good points at times.

Well, that was going to change, Harry vowed to himself. He knew that he was smart, and he knew that he loved to learn new things. He just needed to tap that part of him that had been deeply buried within him for such a long time. His survival depended upon it after all. And it wasn't as if the Dursleys were ever going to see or care about his marks anyway.

With new resolve, Harry got up and headed inside. He had spells to learn, books to peruse and training to do. And not much time to do them all.

It was the day after Ron and Hermione had awakened when Harry entered the hospital wing to find them as well as Neville, Ginny and Luna who had decided to visit as well. They were all looking at a bed at the far end of the hospital wing with a look of utmost loathing in their eyes. Harry followed their gaze and what he saw made his blood boil. Lying peacefully at the other end was Dolores Umbridge.

With a supreme effort, Harry managed to rein in his turbulent emotions (he did not want to alert anyone of his feelings). The sight of that evil toad had made Harry see red. He never thought that he would be able to hate anybody more than he hated that woman. She was right up there next to Bellatrix Lestrange and Voldemort. But, Harry thought maliciously, the important difference here was that Harry could actually do something about it.

Harry smiled coldly to himself for a brief second before quickly schooling his expression and turning his attention back to the conversation that was occurring around him.

'-dunno, she was there this morning when I woke up,' said Ron.

'How did she get here?' asked Neville with an odd hardness in his tone,

'I saw Dumbledore carrying her inside last night when I woke up for a brief while, she hasn't changed her position,' said Hermione. 'I suspect that she is suffering from shock,' she continued.

'Wait, Dumbledore brought her in? How did he manage that?' said Harry incredulously.

'Well, it is Dumbledore we are talking about innit?' said Ron sagely as if Harry was slightly dim for even thinking of asking that question. 'He probably waltzed right in and plucked her off from the centaurs.'

'First and foremost, it is isn't it! Honestly Ron, there is no reason to butcher the English Language!' said Hermione in a bossy tone. Before she could start off on a rant that would probably degenerate into another patented Ron and Hermione Squabble, Neville interjected diplomatically.

'I don't expect that the centaurs would have been too happy with Dumbledore over that,' he said. He had noticed that irritated look on

Harry's face at Ron's sentence and took measures to smooth things over. 'I have a feeling that the centaurs would have been pretty reluctant to hand over Umbridge over. I am surprised that they had acquiesced.'

'Well, he is the Headmaster,' said Hermione in a self righteous manner, 'They do respect him for that, as they should.' With that she looked meaningfully at Harry. Harry knew that she was talking about him breaking things at Dumbledore's office and his irritation grew; he wasn't sorry about the whole thing, though now he regretted ever telling her about it. He rolled his eyes at her, got up and said shortly, 'I have to go, I've got some things I need to do.' Nodding at the rest, he ignored Hermione's look of irritation and left the hospital wing silently vowing not to tell the witch everything anymore.

Fuming, he headed up towards The Room as he started calling it. He wanted to vent and learning some new curses was the best way to do so. On his way upstairs, he passed a doorway and froze; his foot still suspended in the air. Backing up, he gave a second look to the sign tacked sloppily on the door reading 'Headmistress', a slow grin forming on his face till it positively looked evil.

'And what are we up to Mr. Potter?' came a voice behind him just as he was about to open the door. 'Oh, it's you Ginny,' said Harry when he hurriedly turned around and saw her. 'I was, erm, redecorating,' he continued after noting the mischievous look in her eyes.

At this, Ginny's eyes lit up and became devious, 'Oh is that right?' she sounded eerily like her elder twin brothers. 'Want help?'

'Not really, but I think there's room enough for the two of us,' said Harry accommodatingly.

Ginny smiled at him and pulled out her wand. With a grand flourish, Harry opened the door and gestured, 'After you Miss Weasley.'

Giggling, Ginny entered with Harry following her into the garishly decorated room with a smirk.

'I claim the plates on the walls. I especially hated those,' he said, surveying the room and eyeing the kittens gambolling viciously. He noticed that Umbridge had collected more of the foul things till they dominated two of her four walls.

Ginny pouted cutely, 'Aw I wanted the kittens.' She looked up at him hopefully through her fringe. Finally relenting, Harry gestured at the walls and said, 'Fine, you take that half and I'll take this half. We'll meet at the centre above the mantle where the largest plate is.'

With that, they moved to the opposite directions. Harry raised his wand at the nearest plate and said with relish, 'Reducto.'

Immediately, the large technicolour kitten that was looking at him haughtily widened its eyes before diving to the neighbouring plate yowling loudly as the plate it was currently occupying blew up spectacularly.

Harry and Ginny both took their time destroying plate after plate watching as the obnoxious felines within scurried to the next plate. Finally reaching the largest plate at the centre, they took a moment to let the dust settle while watching all the cats within crowded up against each other in the largest plate looking at them in fear.

'Bye-bye kitties,' said Harry as he unleashed a final Reducto, shattering the plate.

Flushed, Harry looked at the rest of the room for his next target. Spotting the lace, he said, 'You take the doilies, I'll do the lace.' Upon receiving her nod, he began to imaginatively and systematically destroy the furniture in the office while Ginny destroyed the doilies and shredded the dried up plants within.

A few minutes later the two of them stood in the centre of the office and surveyed their handiwork. 'The room looks rather improved don't you think Ginny?' said Harry as he laid his eyes on the burnt armchairs that once had a flowery pattern.

'Oh yes, Harry. Personally I think that the black paint that you had splashed on the table linen is a nice improvement,' said Ginny surveying the tar like substance on the tables. 'I hear that black is the new pink anyway, and the smell!' She took a great big sniff. 'The smell is especially divine. A powerful mixture of burnt animal and wet dog, adding strength and body to the already strong smell of the month old rotting corpse of a particularly unhygienic mountain troll who had fallen into a pile of ten day old dragon dung and died,' she continued affecting a posh accent.

They looked at each other for a moment before breaking out into laughter.

'That was great Ginny!' said Harry wiping his eyes, 'Where did you learn that charm that sends out all that green gloop anyway?' he eyed the rancid neon green stuff with an expression of fascinated disgust. 'It's really foul!' He exclaimed holding his nose.

'Fred and George showed me that,' replied Ginny easily, 'I have wanted to use that for ages!' She enthused.

'I would love to learn that one.'

'I don't mind showing you,' said Ginny 'It's got the added bonus of being slimy and slippery. Banishing charms won't work on it and unless you know the correct counter, you will be forced to remove it using muggle methods. And it tends to stain if you try to remove using muggle methods.' She added with relish.

'Wicked,' said Harry, 'Care to show me now?'

'Sure,' said Ginny. 'The incantation is Caliga and you move your wand like this,' she made a sweeping motion with her wand. 'Keep sweeping the wand to and fro to get more of the stuff.'

Harry looked around the ruined (improved in his opinion) office and spied another door. Opening it he saw that it lead into Umbridge's private quarters which he noted with sadistic relish was even more flowery and full of little knick-knacks than her office.

'Caliga!' he shouted sweeping his wand in a wide arc. Immediately the poisonous green sludge started spewing out of his wand in a torrent. Harry held the spell for a while ensuring that it soaked the drawers and into Umbridge's clothes as well as her sheets which he noted were adorned with what only could be her family crest. The irony of the crest being a toad was not lost on him.

Ginny looked on amused at him, 'Had fun?'

'Definitely,' Harry beamed, 'That spell was bloody brilliant!'

'I'll be sure to tell the twins what you thought,' said Ginny with a smile. After a moment of silence, she asked in concern, 'Are you alright Harry?'

'I'm fine' replied Harry automatically. Ginny raised an eyebrow, 'Okay, not really,' he admitted, 'But I'm getting there. I just need my space and time.'

'I guess that is the best we can hope for huh?' said Ginny sympathetically. 'Sirius was a great guy, I've not been around him as long as you have, but spending summer with him was really fun.'

'Yeah,' said Harry. Changing the subject he said, 'Anyway, I have to go ... I enjoyed doing this by the way,' he said gesturing at the office and room.

'So did I,' said Ginny with a smile. 'The next time you need to desecra-er-decorate the personal quarters of any old hags, you know who to call.'

Harry smiled and reached for the door. Just as he was about to step out, Ginny called out, 'Wait! I haven't shown you the counter curse yet!'

'Oh, yeah,' said Harry stepping back in.

'The incantation is Abeo, and you sweep your wand the other way and add a little flick at the end,' said Ginny demonstrating the wand movement.

Harry practised a bit on a part of the slime in the office. Meeting with success, he re-applied the sludge in greater quantities. Thanking Ginny for the impromptu lesson, he left. While trashing Umbridge's office and ruining her personal effects was satisfying, he wasn't yet done. Besides, Ginny had taken some of his thunder away; he did not begrudge her wanting to join in though.

Harry slunk into The Room and practised a few spells from some of his new books. Along with the hair-loss curse and Flatulence jinx, he had practised a few fire-based spells as well. His ultimate goal was to master the Fiendfyre spell that the book had mentioned in passing. The author had advised that he start out small and then build up from there. Harry found that he could more than easily perform most

of the spells. He guessed this was because Voldemort had already mastered them and this muscle memory had transferred to Harry. It was like riding a bicycle after a really long time; you don't really forget the motions, and after a little practice, you are back in form. After practising most of the curses and spells, Harry found that he could perform them just by thinking about them without needing to articulate them. He understood the tactical advantage this gave a person in a duel. One cannot block a spell when one does not know what it is.

Harry noticed that magic was coming easier to him now. Whatever Voldemort had tried to do to Harry that night had benefited him greatly; he could concentrate more, hold his spells longer and could cast new ones with an ease he hadn't had before. He also felt lighter somehow, as if a great burden he was unaware of had been lifted from his shoulders.

In addition to this, Harry had also started to organise his mind. It was subconscious at first and done in his sleep, but Harry had quickly gotten around to understanding the mechanics of the art of Occlumency when he started meditating the previous day itself when he had first started training. This had helped him in recalling most of the spells he had learnt in his fifth year more clearly. For some reason, he found himself starting to organise recall and catalogue his memories backwards. He theorised that remembering yesterday's events helped in recalling the day before and so on till (he hoped) the first few hazy memories he had as an infant. He hoped that he could recall those memories clearly; he really wanted to remember his birth father and mother after all.

So far, Harry had nearly reached the beginning of his fifth year winter term. He hoped to be done with first year by the beginning of his summer holidays, so had set aside every waking moment he wasn't doing something in meditation. He wanted to remember all his pre-Hogwarts time around the Dursleys. He would be able to vent properly then, and any guilt he felt would probably be minimised to the point of being negligible.

From reviewing the memories of that night, Harry had come to the conclusion that Sirius' death truly wasn't his fault. He had acted on the information that he had on hand at that time. Besides, if Sirius had taken Bellatrix seriously, he might still be alive. Harry knew that

he had thought similarly before, but this was the first time he had truly accepted it as fact.

Harry had also come to another startling revelation that he wasn't too happy about. He realised that the bad publicity he had suffered this past year and in his fourth year had partly been his fault. Had he taken a firmer stance with Rita Skeeter from the beginning, or managed his publicity instead of running and hiding from reporters and being unwilling to speak to them, he might not have been a subject of such ridicule and slander in his fourth and fifth year. He also couldn't truly blame the public for believing the lies the prophet had printed about him (as much as it pained him to admit it), after all, what did they know about him besides what they had read in the papers about him? In fact come to think of it, not even his best friends knew about the real Harry Potter. They too were enthralled by the feats he had done. And looking back on it, they were pretty impressive. No matter how lucky he had been in those situations. The fact was that he had done things normal people would either fail in or run away from and had lived to tell the tale.

All in all, Harry had slowly started accepting his lot in life, starting with his status as a celebrity. It would be some time before he started exploiting it however. There still were some things he still wasn't comfortable with. Yet.

After breaking for lunch Harry asked The Room for a book on rituals that he lost himself in for a while. After a bit more meditating, Harry had his dinner which he had delivered to him by one of his new house-elves. He then spent the rest of the night socialising with Neville before heading to bed. He laid awake waiting for midnight.

As the clock chimed twelve times heralding the anticipated hour, Harry took a moment to listen to the snores and soft snuffling that indicated that the other occupants of the dorm were asleep. Satisfied, he got out of bed and slipped on his shoes and his invisibility cloak. As he was about to step out of the door, he noticed Seamus' hand peeking out of his curtains. Getting an idea, Harry gently stuck the sleeping boy's fingers in a goblet full of water that he had filled with the jug near the windowsill after warming it with a charm. He then cast a useful mild sleeping charm used on small animals that he had learnt in the Care of Magical Creatures class from Professor Grubbly-Plank. He poured in an extra amount of his

magic to ensure that the boy did not wake up till later in the morning. Snickering, Harry slipped out of the dorms.

Activating the map and the charm on his necklace, he set off towards the hospital wing. He knew that the necklace would be redundant because of the cloak and also of not much use as at this time of the night as people would be highly suspicious about any noise and bound to notice, but he used it anyway.

Harry made it to the hospital wing in no time, keeping an eye out for Filch and his cat as well as any teachers that had decided to patrol the castle.

Once he reached there, he silently eased the doors open and slipped inside. He crept to the end of the room to where he knew Pomfrey had her quarters and office. He slipped inside thanking his good fortune that the door was open. He found the matron sleeping at her desk, a thin strand of drool connecting the bottom of her mouth to the page of the book she had been reading.

Harry nonverbally cast the sleeping charm again on the matron (he was getting rather good at nonverbal spells) before slipping back out to the infirmary.

Swiftly casting the charm on Ron and Hermione, the only other occupants, he turned his attention onto the one woman he had gone to all this trouble for. He briefly sneered at her before casting a strong stunner. As Umbridge's sleeping body slumped into the bed in unconsciousness, Harry cast a whispered disillusionment charm at her. He had specifically practiced that spell earlier for this purpose.

Quietly levitating her, Harry went out into the forest. Stopping a few yards into the forest, near a clearing with a small stagnant pond, concentrating intensely, he cancelled the disillusionment charm while keeping up the levitation charm. He was about to enervate her when another thought came to him. Smiling cruelly, he levitated her a little higher over the shallow pond before enervating the fat toady woman; as soon as he saw the spell impact her body and take effect he let the levitation charm drop.

Immediately, the fat woman's body dropped unceremoniously into the pond. The pond was deep enough to submerge her but too

shallow to adequately slow Umbridge's fall causing her to painfully hit the bottom of the pond.

Harry lazily watched Umbridge flounder about wildly. Being enervated before suddenly finding themselves being plunged into a mucky pond really caused one a fair amount of disorientation, Harry noted with glee as he saw the foul woman flail about convinced she was about to drown.

Finally, the former Headmistress regained her bearings enough to stand up. She was so short or the pond was deeper than Harry estimated as the water came up to her neck. Covered head to toe in muck and slime with her already frazzled hair even more dirty, Dolores Umbridge slowly and painfully extricated herself onto solid ground.

Harry silently got behind her as she hacked, coughed and puked out the foul water she had inhaled. As soon as he thought she had regained her bearings, he whipped off the cloak, deactivated the necklace and said 'Hello there ... Headmistress,' stressing on her former title with a sneer on his face.

Suddenly, Umbridge jumped and, still choking, slowly turned around to lock eyes with Harry Potter. She barely registered his presence as she looked around her wild-eyed.

'Or is it Undersecretary? I forget,' said Harry after a pause.

'Wh-where am I?' stuttered Umbridge fearfully. The last thing she remembered was being in the hospital wing. Harry pretended to look around before saying in mock concern, 'A bit lost are we? Shame, whatever shall we do? Why it seems that we are back in the Forbidden Forest. But you should know that already, after all you are here and have been here before ...' Harry trailed off keeping his eyes on her watching as she squeaked at finding out her location.

'H-how d-di-did I get here?' said Umbridge fearfully. She finally registered who was talking to her. She shuddered as she saw the cold look on his face and glinting emerald eyes that looked very eerily like the curse he was famed for surviving.

'Ah, good question, you see, I brought you here,' said Harry conversationally. 'After all, we do not want anybody interfering our little tête-à-tête now, do we?' he added maliciously.

Umbridge blanched at his last statement, 'Wh-what d-d-do you w-wa-want from me?' she shrieked, her voice getting higher.

Harry slowly and mockingly shook his head, 'We really do need to do something about that stutter of yours, it is getting rather tiring. Anyway, where was I? Oh yes, you see dear professor, I wasn't happy to know that you had survived capture at the hands of the centaurs. No, not at all! After everything you have put me through, and all the trouble me and my friend had gone through to lead you to them, you just did not have the decency to just die did you?' Harry's tone had morphed from mocking to angry by the end of his diatribe. 'So it looks like I need to, handle this myself. After all, as they say, "if you want something done right, do it yourself."' He cocked his head to one side twirling his wand between his fingers.

Umbridge gulped, nervously eyeing Harry's wand before saying in a falsely confident voice, 'You wouldn't dare Potter; I'm the Undersecretary to the Minister! The minute Cornelius hears about this he will have you expelled and thrown into Azkaban for attacking a Ministry employee!'

Harry threw his head back and laughed, 'Fudge?' he said between bouts of laughter, 'Ooooh I'm so scared!' he mocked, 'Fudge is too busy covering his stupid pinstriped sweaty arse to bother with you right now! Now that he has seen Voldemort with his own eyes,' he snarled.

Umbridge flinched at Voldemort's name before recovering, 'that again? The Dark Lord is dead and gone, you nasty little liar!' she raged, 'It looks like we will have to take more serious measures with you Mr. Potter. Now get me back to the castle before things become even more dire for you.'

'Shut up you stupid bitch!' snarled Harry, 'Voldemort has come back, in fact, he was there right in your precious Ministry and your dear Minister was there to see him personally! It's there in the fucking paper too you silly cow! That twat Fudge is scrambling to cover his arse now that the truth has finally come out. He will be lucky to last the month before being chucked out into the street.'

Umbridge got paler and paler at this revelation, 'No, this cannot be! Lucius personally reassured us that-'

'Oh yes Lucius Malfoy, funny story; he was also there cavorting in full Death Eater Regalia along with his other Death Eater friends. In fact, joining them were those who had recently escaped Azkaban,' Harry drawled, watching with relish as Umbridge's toady face went even paler with that revelation. 'In fact he and eleven others have been caught inside the Department of Mysteries, which they had broken into really easily by the way-you should really look to increasing your security, because it is just atrocious. Anyway, they should be halfway to Chateau Azkaban for a lovely summer holiday right now!' he added clapping his hands together in mock glee.

'But enough chitchat now, the hour is getting late, and I need my beauty sleep,' Harry rubbed his hands together.

'We can do this the easy way or the hard way,' he continued, 'personally I hope you choose the former for your sake but I am not adverse to the second choice. Where is my broom?'

Umbridge remained stubbornly silent. 'Ah the hard way then, very well,' saying this, Harry pointed his wand at her and concentrating, flicked his wand lifting Umbridge into the air before slamming her into the nearest tree. Umbridge landed there with a pained squeal. Harry nodded satisfactorily, he did not know if that would work but remembering what Voldemort had done to Pettigrew, worked on a hunch that there was no incantation needed for that. Obviously it was what Voldemort had done as well.

'Still not talking? Very well,' with that, he flicked his wand and sent her flying back into the pond. As soon as she hit the water, Harry lifted her up again before plunging her back in. He did this a few times not giving the former headmistress time to breathe before throwing her back into the same tree she had impacted a few minutes back.

Harry watched her hack and cough dispassionately, 'Are we ready to talk?' he said.

'Go to hell you stupid little brat!' spat Umbridge vindictively, 'I will never tell you where your precious broom is! I hope that the trolls

break it. You will have to pull it from my mind, and I doubt you can do that you pathetic little worm!

'That can be arranged,' said Harry with a glint in his eye. With that, he cast a full body bind on her to her shock before levitating her till she was at eye level with him.

Looking into her eyes and smirking at the fear he saw in them he pointed his wand and said, 'Legilimens!'

Immediately, he violently dove into the fat woman's mind. He brutally perused all her memories not caring if he caused her any pain or if he was ripping her sanity apart. He not only extracted the location of his broom, but also found out a lot of her dirty little secrets. A useful piece of information he had found was the utility of the Blood Quill that she had used to torture the students with. It seemed that it was a family heirloom and had more uses than just torturing people with.

Satisfied, he pulled out just as violently from her mind shredding the last vestiges of her sanity. He watched the gibbering broken woman in front of him in contempt before turning around and heading towards the castle. He did not feel any remorse for his actions. She deserved everything she had coming to her.

The last few days of term flew by, and before Harry knew it he was packing his trunk. He had spent the days discreetly going into the Room of Requirement and practising spells. He was especially happy with that book he had bought with Dudley in mind as it was more than worth his money. Harry chuckled to himself; the author was as vindictive as his name (that is, if it was his real name). He had tried it out on dummies so far, but hadn't had the pleasure of seeing their effects on humans. He did not want to risk it right now even though he was tempted.

He would have ample opportunity to test them out this summer. Dudley wouldn't know what hit him! Harry cackled evilly, rubbing his hands. He really should have bought that book ages ago despite Hagrid not letting him in the summer before first year. It was true that he had picked up most of the spells, but there were some real gems in there that weren't known to the average Hogwarts student.

Harry had also read up on some other rituals as well. The adoption ritual had certainly piqued his interest. Though, he had only

managed to try out a strengthening ritual which would increase his overall body strength by a small amount. It wouldn't make him super strong (and Harry was disappointed at first that he wouldn't be lifting cars with a hand) but it would probably win him a few arm wrestling and weight lifting competitions for his size and weight. He also would be able to throw quite a mean punch! There was a darker version with more impressive results, but Harry didn't fancy the side effect of becoming huge and bulky. He liked his current looks and body too much for that.

Harry was lucky that Ron and Hermione were in the hospital wing all this time, otherwise he was certain that slipping off would have been problematic. He did visit them when he could, but found the exercise a challenge on his patience; Hermione kept trying to bring Sirius up, and she always had that look of smug superiority on her face and just buried in her surface thoughts that Harry found to be really annoying. He was lucky that Ron at least in a rare display of good sense had the decency to shut her mouth up. Then again, judging by the method he used to distract her, and knowing him for nearly half a decade, Harry was pretty sure that it was more a case of Ron putting his foot in his mouth rather than any cleverness on his part. He would always make some inane comment or another that would really get the bushy haired witch riled up, causing her to rant and rave with the ginger.

And Ron in typical ginger fashion would reply back heatedly. This would then lead to them arguing nonstop for hours on end with Hermione getting shriller and shriller and Ron getting redder and redder till he was, in Harry's humble opinion, almost Vernon Dursley purple.

Harry supposed that it was a blessing that they were under the auspices of Madame Pomfrey who (after repeated attempts at calming potions and cheering charms) had resorted to just silencing them to spare her other precious patients, for he was sure that the two of them would have driven him barmy. He did enjoy the show though; after silencing the two, Pomfrey would then retreat back into her office muttering suspiciously to herself about love potions, locked cupboards and hormonal teenagers. He was even gladder when a harried and thoroughly fed up Madame Pomfrey had finally decided to ban any and all visitors from visiting them and had placed the two of them in separate areas of the room like naughty children and had forbidden them to talk to anybody.

All in all, it was a rather relieved looking Madame Pomfrey who had seen them off the hospital wing just two days left till the Leaving Feast.

Not being able to talk to anybody for four days straight had given both of them ample opportunity to start arguing with each other as to whose fault it was. This had the added bonus of allowing Harry to slink off while they were in the throes of their latest passionate argument.

So it was a rather reluctant Harry who was packing his trunk just before the Leaving Feast. He did not look forward to going back to the Dursleys for the summer despite the new freedoms that he had gained. And he was looking forward to the train ride even less. There was only so long those two could argue before Hermione decided to get on his case about his feelings and Sirius. Harry finally slammed the lid of his trunk with a scowl on his face placing the communication mirror he had just found given to him by Sirius just after the Christmas holidays. Its discovery had not helped his current bad mood. Harry was careful not to shatter the mirror. It was after all the last link he had of his new father besides the Firebolt.

Thinking of the Firebolt had brought a smile back to Harry's face. This then turned into a vindictive grin as it reminded him of Umbridge. She was found the following evening after he was done with her. Dumbledore had organised a large search party with the ministry which had some really reluctant participants. The only person enthusiastic in the quest to find her was Filch. Though, if the rumours were true, Percy had petitioned to join in but was forced to back out as he was under a lot of stress due to the investigation headed by Amelia Bones into Fudge's activities as Minister.

It turned out that Arthur Weasley was right about one thing; Percy's promotion definitely was suspicious. It was too bad that Amelia did not know why Fudge had promoted him suddenly, and Arthur couldn't say much; Dumbledore had learnt his lesson after Pettigrew and had taken the necessary steps. Though Harry was certain that Dumbledore would find a way to save Percy; he valued the Weasleys too much to not do that. It looked like everybody and their kneazle got a second chance from Dumbledore. No matter what they had done in the past.

At any rate, they had eventually found the woman nearly comatose. More specifically Hagrid had found her and carried her out. The theory was that the trauma of being a "guest" of a herd of pissed off centaurs was so severe that she had a delayed reaction and had wandered out. Some suspected foul play after her office and quarters were found all but destroyed. But nobody could say for certain.

Harry's mood had steadily worsened as the end of term came. He did not want to go back to those sorry excuses of human beings that he was related to. No matter what reasons Dumbledore cited. His resentment and anger towards the old man was only increased as he thought of the prophecy that was hidden from him and the death it had caused because of it. He could not cope fully with the grief and so his body strived to turn it into the one emotion he did understand that was close to what he was feeling; anger.

He avoided attending the end-of-term feast as he did not want to hear whatever waffle Dumbledore planned on spewing out then.

Aside from that one hiccup of being accosted by Malfoy and his two moronic goons who seemed to think that Harry was responsible for Lucius Malfoy's incarceration, (they were taken care of by DA members who happened to be around when the Slytherins had tried to ambush Harry) the train ride towards Kings Cross was spent peacefully with his friends.

After contemplating just sitting till the train emptied fully, Harry reluctantly got up from his seat in the compartment and hefting his trunk, entered the Muggle world.

A thank you to all those who have reviewed. I'm glad that you liked the story!

Read and review please.

And as usual, another thank you to Firephoenix86!

The first thing Harry noticed when he emerged out of the barrier separating Platform Nine-and-Three-Quarters was his uncle who always seemed to fill any space he occupied, in the literal sense of the word. The next thing he noticed was the small group he and his wife were looking at suspiciously.

Harry followed Vernon's gaze and saw Remus, Tonks, Moody and Mr., and Mrs. Weasley along with Fred and George standing there. In an effort to delay the event of talking to the unpleasant Muggles that were his relatives, he immediately made a beeline towards the motley group. As soon as he came within range, Mrs. Weasley immediately descended upon him and pulled him into one of her crushing near stifling hugs.

Harry absently noticed that not only was her head near his chest, but he no longer felt as crushed as he used to when being hugged by her. Breaking away, Harry shook hands with Remus and greeted the twins as well as the others.

'Wotcher Harry,' said Tonks.

'Hey, what are you guys doing here?' asked Harry.

'Well, Harry we have come to see you off,' said Remus

'Also, we have come to talk to those relatives of yours about a few things for the summer,' Said Arthur Weasley.

'Indeed,' said Moody looking rather sinister with a bowler hat pulled over his magical eye. 'Especially over how they have been treating you'

'I dunno if that's a good idea,' said Harry quickly.

'Oh I think that it's a really good idea,' said Moody, 'That'll be them, then?' He jerked his thumb behind him towards the Dursleys. Harry knew that he had his magical eye on them as he had said that.

As soon as Harry nodded, the group moved as one towards the Dursleys who seemed rooted on the spot. Harry finally noticed his large cousin Dudley trying to look as small as possible, and failing rather spectacularly.

Harry looked on as The Order uttered various threats to the Dursleys should they ever fail to treat Harry right. He was pretty amused at the Dursleys' reaction to Moody's eye when he revealed it.

He also was irritated at the Order's antics. Here they were threatening those fat Muggles on his behalf and yet they decide to do it now, when Harry had the means to defend himself. Where were they last year? Or the year before that? Hell, where were they before he even knew about Hogwarts and the magical world? When he was a small helpless child stuffed in a cupboard with spiders for company and forced to slog every day to "earn his keep".

Harry kept his face impassive as these thoughts ran through his head, he knew that the Order had been tailing him ever since, and yet they had not done anything to help him then. His anger at Dumbledore grew even more as he guessed that they probably had been forbidden from interfering on that old man's instructions.

He waved them goodbye careful to keep his expression neutral. The only good thing he could find about this whole situation was that it looked like they won't be posting guards around Privet Drive to keep an eye on him if what they unknowingly implied when threatening the Dursleys was true. This gave him ample enough opportunity to learn and practice new spells.

Harry loaded the boot of Vernon's company car with his trunk which was no longer heavy for him anymore due to his improved physique and the Featherlight charm he had placed on it and the empty owl cage (Hedwig would be flying directly to the house), and got into the car. Vernon who had been waiting impatiently for him to get in, pulled out into the street without even waiting for Harry to put his seatbelt on.

Harry absently looked out of the window at the cars flashing by. The Dursleys had been quiet so far but Harry knew that it would only be a matter of time that Vernon finally regained his bluster. And he was not disappointed. By the time the car had reached the M25 and was speeding along towards Surrey; Harry could hear the man muttering under his breath and sending scathing looks at Harry through his rear-view mirror getting redder and redder.

Harry pretended not to notice but as the car pulled into little Whinging and stopped at the driveway of Number Four, he tensed up gripping his wand which he had kept under the sleeve of his jumper; ready for a fight.

As soon as the car stopped, Vernon popped the boot open while Dudley and Petunia got out of the car and into the house as fast as they could manage without running.

Harry got his trunk out without much difficulty and followed his uncle who had been watching him with beady eyes into the house. As soon as he got in, his uncle turned around to face him.

'Close the door, boy!'

Harry set his trunk and owl cage down on the side and turned around to close the door.

The sound of the lock hitting home had yet to die out when Harry, suddenly sensing danger, dropped down on one knee and ducked. This was just in time as the huge meaty fist that was aimed at his head missed; causing the obese Muggle behind the punch that was Vernon Dursley to overbalance with his arm extended out in the air in front of him that, till a second ago, was occupied by his nephew's head; a few inches away from the thick window pane in the front door that would have probably sprained his wrist had his fist made contact with it judging by the velocity it was travelling in.

Harry did not waste any time, as soon as he had hit the floor, he immediately spun around till he was facing his fat uncle. He unleashed his fist right between Vernon's legs at that moment, putting all of his ritual enhanced strength into the punch, adding to the momentum gained from the spin. Still acting on instinct and not sparing any time, Harry then got behind Vernon, where he unleashed a wandless Banisher point blank at the man's back.

Vernon was still processing the pain radiating from his groin and had just bent down on reflex and agony when the magic unleashed from his nephew rammed into him. This threw him headfirst right into the door which shook from the impact but held firm.

Dazed, Vernon sank to the floor while Harry quickly got to his feet and immediately stood to the side till he was facing both Vernon and

the remaining two Dursleys who had yet to react to the events unfolding in front of them.

His aunt and cousin watched with shock as Harry had disabled and incapacitated Vernon all in the space of a few seconds. They were not used to having their relative who used to be so weak and easy to push around, fight back and were thus unprepared. Dudley was the first to shake out of his stupor. He was not of intelligent mind, and did the only thing he knew to do in a situation involving Harry, beat him up.

So with that thought, he raised his fist and lumbered towards Harry. Only to be brought up short by the business end of Harry's wand pointed right between his eyes and glowing an ominous emerald green.

Dudley's eyes crossed at the object pointed right at him before looking beyond and up the arm into his cousin's face. He realised with a start that the small titchy kid that used to be his cousin was now towering over him. His face was an emotionless mask with a cold green fire in his eyes that were actually glowing in the low light of the dying sun with almost the same intensity as the tip of his wand. 'Back. Off.' Harry growled in a dangerous voice.

For the first time in his life, Dudley Dursley felt afraid. What was even more galling was the fact that the person who he was currently afraid of was the person whom he was used to tormenting and bullying for all these years. Fear welled up in his belly and sweat ran down his spine as he backed away.

'Right, to the living room, we are going to have a family meeting,' said Harry tersely. Seeing Petunia about to open her mouth, he cut her off and said, 'Either you get there on your own, or I get you there. I promise you that you will not like option two.' At this Petunia shut her mouth and with a look of disdain on her horsy face moved into the living room followed closely by Dudley.

Harry began to follow them, but as he was about to set foot into the living room, Vernon groaned. Noticing him, Harry sneered and stepping into the room, flicked his wand at the obese man, jerking the fat man towards the living room violently where he collided with the wall just next to the doorway before being dragged into the room where he then flew past Harry and impacted with his son and wife

sending all three of them painfully into the sofa which groaned in impotent protest with the sudden weight placed on it.

Harry regally sat down on the armchair that was usually used to hold Vernon's obese frame treating it as if it were his throne placing his elbows on each of the armrests and clasping his hands in front of his face underneath his chin. He watched with a cold gleam as the three Dursleys tried to untangle themselves from each other. Petunia was trying unsuccessfully to get her large husband off herself gently. Finally with a mighty heave from both mother and son, Vernon was unceremoniously rolled off the sofa and onto the floor where he groaned but did not move.

'Right,' said Harry when he had the undivided attention of his cousin and aunt, 'For fourteen years now, I have had to endure you and your belittling, abuse, neglect and bullying. You have enjoyed lording it over me using the fact that I was smaller and not able to defend myself. Now I've had enough, from now on Dudley will do any and all chores you have in mind for me-'

'Oh no you don't freak! You will do all the chores that we have allotted for you or else you will not get any meals. If you think that you can get away with lazing around you have another thing coming!' roared Vernon, interrupting Harry mid speech, he had finally managed to regain his wind and awareness enough to give his nephew the most intimidating glare he could muster as he got up and hefted himself onto the sofa.

However, to his shock Harry did not even flinch at his tone. Harry drew his wand back out and pointed to Dudley.

'Don't think you can threaten us with that boy! I know you cannot do magic outside that freak school of yours or you will be expelled!' shouted Vernon triumphantly,

'Is that right?' Harry smiled coldly. Pointing his wand at Dudley, he said loudly for dramatic effect, 'Abscido'

Immediately Dudley started to claw at his throat as his air supply was cut off. He collapsed on the floor in front of his horrified parents turning slightly blue and beginning to convulse from the lack of air.

Just as it looked like Dudley would pass out from the lack of air, Harry cancelled the spell giving Dudley some much needed air. The rotund boy started coughing, inhaling deeply and frantically supplying his body with sweet oxygen.

'Will you look at that, I have used magic!' said Harry. He looked mockingly around the house before turning his attention back to a grey Vernon and a frantic Petunia who was crouched next to Dudley, 'And no owls telling me that I have been expelled either! It looks like the Ministry either does not care, or cannot tell that I have cast magic!' He gave a wide fake smile looking at his relatives as their thick heads and limited intelligence processed the ramifications of his words and actions.

'I hope you loved that charm, it cuts off the air supply encasing the target in a vacuum, we learnt it in our first year. It's pretty handy when you want to snuff out a candle. It's not much use when you want to kill a person though, it is ridiculously easy to counter ...' Harry trailed off, 'But you are Muggles!' he exclaimed in mock surprise, 'you couldn't even counter a tickling hex even if you tried! Shame really, that means you wouldn't be a match for an eleven year old wizard!' he tisked

Smiling maliciously he continued, 'Well it seems that I have the power now, and so now I am stronger and bigger than you. You three are now nothing but pathetic, helpless Muggles.' he spat gesturing at them with his left hand while his right was twirling his wand between his fingers.

'So we are going to be playing by my rules now. So from now on, Dudley will be doing all the chores in the house. The days of you lazing around on your fat arses while I do all the work has passed. You want work done in the house, you do it! It might even help with your weight problem.' He said disdainfully looking at his cousin. It seemed that last year's diet had completely failed for Dudley had reverted to being just as large as ever.

'And if you do not comply, well,' he brandished his wand causing his relatives to cower back in fear. 'I can more than take care of you.' satisfied that the message had sunk in, he put his wand away leant back and looking at his aunt said in a cheerful voice, 'Now what's for dinner? I'm famished! I hope you have cooked something good for me Auntie.' Seeing her nod jerkily, he beamed, 'Excellent! I'll just put

my trunk up in my room, shall I?' with that he got up and strode into the hallway where he floated his belongings up with a flourish of his wand. Putting them in his room, he thundered back down the stairs causing as much noise as he could manage knowing that it would irritate the hell out of his aunt and uncle.

He plopped down at the table, shortly followed by his uncle and cousin.

Petunia had already served the occupants with their usual portions of food before Harry had come in. Harry took one look at his chipped and worn plate on which was a small, measly, burnt piece of her roast (which she had cooked to welcome her precious Dudders home from school), glanced at Dudley's generous helping and said, 'Now that won't do,' with that, he floated Dudley's plate away from his cousin just as he was about to dig in; exchanging it for the meagre rations.

'You'll never lose weight if you keep up with this atrocious diet,' he admonished Dudley, 'Since your previous diet obviously did not work, we'll try out a new one where you eat my share and I eat yours. I hope there is no problem with that?' he directed his question to his aunt and uncle glaring at them challengingly.

Cowed, Vernon muttered 'No, not at all,' eyeing Harry's wand warily while Petunia just nodded wordlessly, looking as if every motion was causing her acute physical pain too afraid to fill Dudley's plate back up.

The following meal was the best one of Harry's life at Privet Drive. He enjoyed every single nervous glance sent his way and relished every jump they made at any small noise coming out from him as he purposefully clacked his teeth against the fork at every bite.

Harry closely watched Dudley as he wolfed down the portion originally meant for his formerly scrawny cousin. Just as Dudley was about to reach for seconds, Harry pounced. 'Ah-ah-ah! I think you've had more than enough for tonight,' he said sending a stinging hex at Dudley's meaty paw. Dudley immediately retracted his hand and squealed in pain, fixing his watery blue eyes at Harry.

'You can have some of the vegetables however,' said Harry ignoring the murderous stare sent his way by Dudley and gesturing at the

boiled carrots and beans that Petunia had cooked for herself, 'I'm sure that your mum won't mind terribly.'

Dudley only scowled in response. Harry cleared his throat and waved his wand, effectively quelling any response his relatives were about to make.

The rest of the meal continued in silence. After the roast, Petunia stiffly got up and collected the plates and got the chocolate pudding out which she had also spent hours on making to welcome her son back from school (even though the fat lump of lard had arrived two days ago). She placed the largest of the three glasses in front of Dudley while taking the two remaining smaller ones for herself and Vernon. Harry eagerly waited for Dudley to pick his spoon up, and just as Dudley was about to scoop out a helping, he quickly Summoned the glass away and set it down in front of himself grinning maliciously as he saw his cousin's eager face literally sag in disbelief. 'Now, now I am afraid you cannot have dessert, after all, you didn't have any of your vegetables!' said Harry mockingly, waving his wand at Dudley's face.

Dudley's and Vernon's face turned an identical shade of puce as they furiously began to open their mouths to give Harry a piece of their minuscule minds. Harry immediately silenced both of them and with a sticking charm ensured that they could not get off their seats. He then Vanished the contents of Vernon's glass while saying 'You have to watch your cholesterol Uncle dear, wouldn't want you keeling over with a heart attack now would we? Since you lot obviously have no manners and cannot behave, I'm afraid that you will have to sit there while I finish my dessert.' Saying this, Harry gleefully Vanished Petunia's dessert as well, and after silencing her and sticking her to her chair, worked his way through the chocolate pudding taking care to slowly eat and relish every scoop taken by the spoon he had specifically shrunk for the purpose all the while smiling sadistically at the hungry look in Dudley's eyes.

Finally finishing his dessert, Harry got up, burping elegantly and patting his stomach. 'Dinner was lovely Petunia, and the dessert was exquisite.' He then cleaned the remains of his dessert to Dudley's silent dismay and left for the door. Before leaving, he stopped and said, 'Oh and before I forget, we cannot have Dinky Diddidums sneaking snacks in the middle of the night now, can we?' He took his wand out and silently locked the refrigerator and pantry

up. He then left the kitchen and cancelling the sticking and silencing charms, headed up towards his room. He chuckled as he heard Dudley's roar of rage and frustration as he discovered what Harry had done.

Harry stopped outside his room noticing the locks in front of the door in distaste. He quickly vanished all of them silently and got inside, closing and locking the door behind him with a quick Colloportus. He eyed the pathetic furniture and the small room he currently occupied. He had no idea what spells he could use to expand the room and if he couldn't expand it, he couldn't change any of the furniture. Suddenly getting an idea, he called for Dobby (he really did not think that he could possibly survive reciting the names of his other elves with his ribs intact).

Immediately the elf in question appeared in front of him. 'What is Master wanting of Dobby?'

Gesturing around the small room, Harry said, 'Can you do something to this room and the furniture? It is a bit small.' Harry trailed off looking at Dobby hopefully. He did not bother correcting Dobby on his form of address; he had given up doing that a long time ago.

Dobby took one look around the room and said in a scandalised voice, 'Master is not living in such a small room! It is no bigger than Dobby's old quarters with old master's house!'

'Do you need any help with the remodelling? Perhaps I can call another elf to help out? I think Wink-'

'No sir! Dobby is not needing assistance! Dobby can do it himself!' said the elf hastily. With that, he quickly waved his hands and set about expanding the room to twice its size. He then started to change the tiny rickety bed to a large king sized bed and the desk into a larger and more elegant version of itself. The wardrobe was expanded to twice its capacity and the windows made larger and more elegant.

Harry watched all this with an amused smile on his face. He knew that even a small mention of that former alcoholic elf that used to belong to the Crouches in the presence of Dobby would be more than enough to shut the guy up and get him to do his work with

minimal fuss. It would also cut through the babbling which at times, like a few minutes before could get vexing (who liked their room being compared to a house-elf's quarters anyway?)

'This won't be noticed from the outside by anybody right?' Said Harry, he was concerned about the Ministry and Dumbledore finding out about his newly expanded bedroom that for all intents and purposes was as big as an entire flat.

'Dobby is expanding the room from the inside sir. He is also masking his magic so that the Ministry does not notice.'

'Thank you Dobby. I guess I will be seeing you tomorrow with breakfast then? Or is it going to be Twinky?'

'No sir, it is Willy who is going to be serving you tomorrow,' said Dobby sounding slightly downcast at the prospect of not being able to serve the Great Harry Potter.

'Oh yeah, tomorrow's Thursday!' said Harry. He had yet to find more work for his elves. So far, he was managing with having one of the elves cook all three of his meals for a day in the week. With seven elves, that meant he had a personal elf for every day of the week. Being forced to cook for the Dursleys for all his life had put Harry off the prospect of ever partaking in that activity even if it was for his own benefit. Especially now that he had an option to skip that chore what with having seven different highly capable chefs who could do the work and actually loved every single second of it!

Harry may be able to make an extremely sinful French toast or cheese omelette (cooking for the Dursleys does give one extensive knowledge in making some of the most tasty foods even if they aren't good for you), and the food that he cooked may come out better than his horsy aunt could ever hope to manage, but that did not mean that Harry would ever voluntarily make food for himself.

Dobby unpacked Harry's trunk, placing his things in the necessary areas and with great relish, disposed of Dudley's hand-me-downs that Harry had taken to wear in the last few days at Hogwarts (his friends could be a bit too nosy and observant at times) before disappearing.

Harry then stripped down to his pants, discarding the last remaining set of castoffs and his glasses, throwing them into the corner. He sank down on his new and improved bed looking at his slightly shaking hands. He could not believe that Uncle Vernon had tried to hit him; sure he had been overly cruel and spiteful, but he had never tried to beat Harry up. That was more Dudley's forte.

Harry was even more surprised at his reaction. The way he had immediately sensed the threat and incapacitated Vernon was not something he knew to do normally. Figuring that it had been gifted to him by Voldemort, he snorted, looks like Tommy knows how to fight!

He finally relaxed and lay down closing his eyes and drifting off to sleep.

Harry was about to open the front door and step out into the sunshine when the doorbell rang. Opening the door he saw the last person he expected to see, yet was hoping to see ever since the incident at the Department of Mysteries. Standing in front of him was none other than Sirius Black.

Harry couldn't believe his eyes. Mouth hanging open, he tried to formulate a response, 'I ... how ... Sirius?'

'Hello Harry,' said the person who looked a lot like Sirius in a voice that sounded exactly like Harry's recently deceased godfather.

Harry regained his senses; quickly pointing his wand at the figure in front of him, he said in a cold voice, 'How do I know that this isn't some sort of trick?'

The person in front of him (Harry refused to think that it was Sirius) let out a bark-like laugh that Harry was very familiar with and said, 'It really is me Harry! Look I can prove it to you,' with that, he changed into his Animagus form and back again, 'See?'

Harry stood there dumbly looking at his godfather for a few seconds. Finally convinced that it was him, he tackled Sirius hugging him for all he was worth. After a few moments they separated, surreptitiously wiping their eyes.

'Getting old there Sirius?' said Harry finally noticing the grey hair on his godfather's temples, 'You have no idea,' said Sirius. 'It's got to do

with what happened to me in the Death Room and the veil. It's also the reason I came to you first without telling anybody else that I am alive.'

'What do you mean?' asked Harry with trepidation. 'What happened to you anyway? Remus told me that you had died ...'

'Well, that is what I had thought too at first, but then I realised that the veil hadn't killed me. It just sent me back in time,' said Sirius.

'Oh,' said Harry processing this new piece of information, 'how far back?'

'Around forty years back, I would've come visit you earlier, but at that time, there were two of me running around and I didn't want to cause any scenes by being spotted or recognised when I was supposed to be in Azkaban or on the run.'

'That makes sense,' said Harry understandingly. Perking up he said, 'Does that mean I can now come and live with you now that your name has been cleared and everything? There won't be any issue with you taking custody since you've already adopted me.'

'Wait, you've already done the ritual?' said Sirius with a look of surprise on his face, Harry only nodded wordlessly, hoping that Sirius hadn't changed his mind.

'Damn,' said Sirius, 'I was hoping that you hadn't already done it! I actually was hoping to stop you from doing it-,' he stopped abruptly on seeing Harry's stricken face.

Realising what he had said and how it had sounded coming out, Sirius quickly explained, 'It's not that I didn't want you Harry! Nothing makes me happier knowing that you are mine, I will always want you, never doubt that.'

'Then why?' asked Harry. He was slightly appeased but still wary.

'Well, that is what I wanted to explain. You see there is a slight complication that has arisen because of me being catapulted into the past.'

'"Complication"?' said Harry nonplussed.

'You see, when I had been thrown back that far, I saw this as a chance to start a new life for myself as a Muggle. The thing is, one night I had met this beautiful Muggle ...' he trailed off uncertainly

'Go on,'

'I won't bore you with the details, Harry, but one thing led to another, and before I knew it, I found myself sleeping in her bedroom.' Sirius broke off here, looking nervously at Harry.

'So?' said Harry beginning to relax. While he was slightly uneasy listening about his godfather's sex life, he didn't see how this was pertinent to the conversation. 'It looks like you found yourself somebody to spend your life with. I'm not a little kid Sirius! I can handle that fact. Did you marry her?' he inquired.

'I wish,' said Sirius miserably. Clearing his throat he continued, 'You see, Harry, uh, I had only met her for that one night. What we had done would be called-'

'A one night stand, yes Sirius I know, I'm not as innocent as you think I am,' cut in Harry bemusedly.

'Oi! I wasn't finished yet,' Said Sirius giving Harry an annoyed look,

'Sorry,' said Harry not sounding sorry at all.

'Now where was I? Oh yes, well the next morning I found out to my shock that not only was she married but also had a kid! I got out of there as soon as possible.'

Harry winced in sympathy at Sirius' words. 'While I can only imagine your pain, what is that got to do with this?' He said gesturing between the both of them.

'It's not that I slept with her, but who she was,' Here Sirius' face turned mournful.

'What, was it the Queen or something?' said Harry snickering, imagining the monarch going out into a random pub anonymously for a drink.

'Oh, ha, ha,' said Sirius giving Harry a dirty look, 'No it wasn't the Queen, but somebody much worse. Judging from the picture of her four year old daughter that I had seen and what she had named her, I gathered that it was your Maternal Grandmother!'

'You slept with my Grandmum?' Harry half said-half yelled incredulously.

'Yeah, and not only that, I found out later that our night together had resulted in her becoming pregnant! Thankfully her husband never found out ... eventually the guilt was too much for her that I decided to oblivate the night from her memory'

'Then ... that-that means ... that you are Lily's real father?' stuttered Harry in dawning comprehension and horror,

'Um, you could say that, yeah,' said Sirius running his hand through his hair nervously. Now the disparity between the two sisters in looks really hit Harry. As did the fact that Lily was the magical one. He had always thought that his aunt or mother was adopted or something ... but this?

'So,' said Harry slowly having another epiphany, 'That means that you are my real Grandfather?'

'Uh huh,' said Sirius, 'But now since you have done the ritual, I'm also your father. That makes you your mother's half brother as well! I think you know why I didn't want you to do it.'

Harry couldn't take the shock of the situation anymore, faintly he heard somebody scream out 'Nooooooo' sounding suspiciously like him as he felt himself falling.

Harry woke up with a start, a scream dying on his lips. Breathing heavily, he wildly looked around the room, sweat dripping down his bare chest and his body wrapped in the blankets.

He realised that he was in his bedroom in Number Four. The sun had just risen with the first rays of dawn hitting him in the face. Frantically he shouted, 'Dobby!'

Immediately the little elf appeared in front of the wizard, 'You is calling Dobby master?'

'Yeah, can you tell me what day and time it is, please?'

'It is being six in the morning the day after sir arrived at his Muggles' house sir!' said Dobby. If he was confused, he hid it rather well.

'Oh thank Merlin,' said a relieved Harry. He sagged back into the bed, 'It was only a dream!' laughing slightly hysterically, he turned his attention back to Dobby, 'Can you tell Willy to have breakfast ready by nine? Thanks.'

As the elf disappeared, Harry got up and exited the room for the bathroom down the hall. Finishing his morning ritual, he got into a pair of shorts and a t-shirt. Putting on his trainers and tucking his wand into his waistband, he cautiously opened the front door.

Finding the stoop empty of any dead godfathers claiming to be his grandfather, he finally relaxed. Shaking his head at the weird dream and exhaling loudly, Harry immediately started off at a brisk pace. He figured that duelling would require a lot of physical stamina and it would be a good idea to increase it. While he found that he not only had the experience of magical duelling but Muggle fighting as well from Tom, and knew how to move his body, he still had to get his body used to the punishment that it would endure from a long bout.

Harry still marvelled at the fact that Voldemort of all people knew how to fight without magic. He theorised that before he became the big bad Dark Lord, Tom had to rely on both magical and non magical techniques to win fights in his bid to make a name for himself.

Harry found himself winded by the time he had reached Magnolia Crescent. Slowing down to a brisk walk and breathing deeply, he made his way to the play park. Vaulting over the low gate, he made his way to the back of the park.

He knew from his various explorations around Little Whinging that the park opened out into a small patch of woods. The fence separating the park and the woods was high but covered by the bushes was a small gap which one had to strain to see.

It was the perfect escape route for Harry when he was younger and running to avoid his overweight cousin. The opening was small

enough that somebody of Dudley's girth couldn't squeeze through. Not that they ever found the place. They weren't too bright anyway!

Rooting around the bushes, Harry finally found the opening. He noticed that it was much smaller than the last time he had been here. Then again, that was when he was ten, small, and scrawny.

Pulling his wand out again, Harry cut through some of the links in the chain in the fence, making the opening large enough for him to duck through.

Once through the opposite side, he cast a Notice-Me-Not charm on the entrance before proceeding forward. He quickly reached the clearing he used to frequent many times as a child to get away from Dudley. Pacing around the clearing, he nodded to himself, satisfied; this would be big enough for him to practise his spells. He knew that the trees went on for a while before coming out onto a busy motorway, so he did not run the risk of being noticed, as long as he was careful.

Returning back to the play park, Harry made his way back to Wisteria walk and Privet Drive picking up the pace till he was matching the speed with which he had started out at.

Sweating and breathing heavily, he got behind some bushes in his aunt's backyard before silently Apparating back to his room. Gathering his bath things, he made his way back to the bathroom for a quick bath to wash the sweat off with a smile on his face and a spring on his step.

Summer at the Dursleys was beginning to turn out rather well. For the first time in his short life, Harry didn't mind living with the Dursleys. It really is good to be King!

Dudley Dursley rolled out of bed one day at the crack of noon. Still sleepy from staying up late with his mates, he blearily got out of his room thinking about the promise this night had to offer. Malcolm's parents would be gone out for the evening meaning that they would all be able to get together for a "sleepover". Piers had managed to nick a case of Guinness and Gordon had managed to nick his brother's stash of adult videos while he and Dennis had managed to procure a few cartons of cigarettes. Oh yes, Dudley was looking forward to tonight!

Suddenly, something caught him around the ankles, and for the first time in his life Dudley felt the sensation of weightlessness before he was rudely brought down to earth ... and down the stairs he was about to descend.

Dazed, Dudley lay at the bottom of the staircase looking up at the ceiling and wondering where his mother was. Surely all that racket would have garnered her attention, and she would come to help him.

The ensuing silence that came immediately after his fall was finally shattered by a low mocking chuckle. Dudley painfully rolled around to see Harry leisurely descending the stairs twirling that damnable wand of his.

It had been more than a week after his cousin had arrived and the only interaction Dudley had with him so far was when his cousin had somehow managed to drive him, Piers and Gordon off Mark Evans two days back. So he was surprised to note that not only did Harry look healthy, but was dressed in expensive looking clothes that Dudley coveted but couldn't buy, mainly due to his size.

'Trip Jinx, cousin,' Harry said, 'as the name says, it causes a person to trip ... like it?' he smiled.

'You could have killed me, you pillock! What if I had twisted my neck falling down?' yelled Dudley, finally gathering his wits.

At this Harry crouched down in front of Dudley, his smile slipping from his face and his eyes cold. 'I could have said the same thing seven years ago Dudders! Remember? When you pushed me down the stairs ... turnabout is fair play after all ... count your lucky stars that I didn't immediately shove you in a tiny cupboard like your dear deadbeat daddy did to me for "carrying on" as he put it,' Harry

growled in suppressed rage, roughly putting air quotes when imitating his uncle.

Dudley gulped at the suppressed anger coming out of his cousin's voice. He remembered that day also. Looking back on it, it could have ended badly for his cousin. The same cousin who had saved him from those monsters in hooded cloaks (not that Dudley would ever admit to seeing them) who had apparently tried to suck his soul last summer. 'I was seven then Potter! How was I supposed to know then that it could have been fatal? I thought it was good fun at that time.' He tried to justify himself. Apparently that was the wrong choice of words, as Harry's face darkened as his eyes now no longer hindered by his bulky glasses seemed to glow an eerie green that was seen even through it was the middle of the afternoon.

'Yeah? Well, guess what Dursley, I was seven then too! In case that escaped your thick head' Harry spat. Getting up he regarded his cousin, 'Doesn't feel so good when you're at the other end of the stick now does it? Somehow, I can understand now why you are such a bully. It certainly is fun having that much power over someone weaker than you ... oh I have waited a long time for this.' His voice trailed off into a hiss.

'You think you're such a big man carrying that thing around, don't you? I'd like to see you try and take me on without it!'

'What, oh you mean this! It's called a wand Diddikins, can you pronounce it? Wa-and,' said Harry, dragging out the last word in a mock-baby voice waving the aforementioned wand in his cousin's fat face, emitting gold sparks as he did so. 'Surely that thick lump of lard that you call a brain can pronounce it. Personally if you ask me I think that all that money is being wasted on you in Smellings. You obviously don't learn much there do you?'

'It's Smeltings and g-get that thing away from me!' said Dudley, warily eyeing the wand, his face going white as it emitted the sparks.

'Smeltings, Smellings,' Harry waved his left hand in a see-saw motion, 'makes no difference; it's a filthy Muggle school anyway. And as for fighting you fairly without a wand, why should I? You've always had to have your little friends backing you up when picking on me didn't you? Hell, you still need them to hold your hand when picking on nine year olds!' Harry shook his head mockingly, 'I bet

without them all the kids would laugh at how pathetic you are. As for me; well, it's just me, my wand and my magic.' Looking at Dudley flinch at the word magic, Harry smiled and said maliciously, 'Yes, Magic. Still afraid of that word are we Diddikins? Well you should be.' He sidled up towards his cousin's ear, 'Using magic, I can make you feel pain beyond imagining with just a thought ... I can kill you just by desiring your death, or make your life a living hell ... all by just using my imagination and saying a few words ... So you would be right to fear me Dudley Dursley.' He paused to look at his cousin's horrified face. 'And the best bit is no one would ever know, or be able to find out or even care; because to us wizards, you Muggles are nothing but filthy beasts. So be afraid, be very afraid ...'

Harry straightened up and stretched, 'Well, I'm heading out, got better things to do than sit here with you, as much as I enjoyed our bonding session.' He headed to the door.

Opening it, he paused at the threshold, 'Oh, and by the way, your mum's gone out somewhere, so it looks like you'll have to fend for yourself as far as food is concerned. I kind of ate the stuff she had prepared for you.' Giving an exaggerated belch, Harry waltzed out into the sunshine snickering, leaving Dudley to painfully pick himself up.

Closing the door behind him, Harry walked down the street towards the space he had found for himself a few days back. Today was an especially warm and sunny Saturday; not a cloud in the sky. That meant that there were a lot of people outside basking in the sun and enjoying the rare weather.

Harry had built up quite a sweat walking and so had stopped to remove his t-shirt in an effort to alleviate the heat he was feeling. Stuffing it in the back pocket of his shorts, he continued on towards the park feeling the slightly cooler air on his chest, the silver necklace glinting brightly in the sunlight. He had started to feel more self-confident and comfortable in his body.

Reaching the fence, he surreptitiously slipped into his spot hoping he wasn't seen. There he set down the books he had carried with him and started to practice some of the spells listed there. He couldn't do anything too serious as he could not risk being seen. The clearing may be secluded, but it wasn't big. While he couldn't

use fire based or explosive spells, he could still transfigure and use other offensive and defensive spells.

Harry decided to practice some of his Transfiguration today. While he found himself taking to Curses Hexes and Charms with an unusual and near frightening speed, the same could not be said about Transfiguration. It seemed that Voldemort really did not spend that much time transfiguring things when duelling. Preferring to Curse, Hex, Jinx and Charm the life out of his opponents.

Thus seeing a weakness in Voldemort's duelling technique, Harry concentrated on Transfiguration. He himself never was that good at the subject, but then again, he hadn't really applied himself before. However that was about to change, so Harry started out from the beginning working his way up from first year spells. The additional books he had bought on Transfiguration had all stressed that he needed a solid foundation from which to build on. This is why students started out small, transfiguring small things like matches into needles. The skill may be useless, but it was a building exercise to bigger and better things.

Harry spent about two hours transfiguring various objects and creatures. His goal was to minimise his wand movements and be able to do it silently. He had more success with the latter than with the former.

Finishing for the day, and sweaty from the spell work, Harry got up to have the lunch that had just appeared courtesy of his elves. Contrary to what he had claimed, he hadn't eaten the food his aunt had made Dudley. While his aunt was a decent cook, Harry's house-elves were even better, having gained experience at Hogwarts. Thus Harry preferred their food.

Not that it stopped him from nicking Dudley's food and throwing it in the bin. After all, his cousin could gain to lose some weight. A small part of him did think it would have been better if he had sent it to an orphanage or something, but Harry didn't want to expose those people to his aunt's cooking. They were tortured enough.

Harry had his lunch in the play park with the throng of Muggles out enjoying the sun. The reason for this mainly was to refine his Legilimency skills. Ever since being possessed by Tom, Harry had found himself reading people's thoughts whenever he had made eye

contact with them. This grew to the point that from yesterday, he no longer needed to look them in the eye to be able to hear their surface thoughts.

This was getting a bit distracting. Harry really had no desire to hear the private thoughts of all the people around him all the time! It had resulted in one hell of a headache yesterday being privy to all those thoughts. He was lucky that there weren't that many people around. Even worse were some of the thoughts that Harry had accidentally lifted from some older women concerning him and his posterior (among other parts of his body) when they had noticed him. Those were rather disturbing.

So Harry had spent the day frantically trying to stem the influx of thoughts he was getting. An hour of practicing had finally managed to yield results rewarding him with blessed silence. However, he knew that the skill needed to be refined and improved so he started practicing by picking thoughts of targeted individuals in a crowd.

After learning a few interesting facts about the people around him, Harry relaxed and started to meditate. He spent some time bolstering his mental defences and organising his thoughts before sinking deep within his mind looking for his magical core. He had stumbled across his magical core a few days back when on a whim, he had decided to see how far and deep he could go while meditating.

His meditation done, Harry opened his eyes and relaxed for a while pondering what to do for the rest of the day. Looking at his wrist finally gave him an idea; he got up and putting on his t-shirt on, went back into his practice arena. There he Apparated to his room to put his books away, before Apparating back. He stepped out of the clearing and headed for the town centre.

Locating a watch store, he entered the store to browse for a bit. Knowing that he wouldn't be able to wear digital watches, he opted for the traditional analogue ones. The fact that they looked good was an added bonus. Harry finally found seven automatic watches from various brands that he really liked. Finding the decision a bit too hard, he tallied the amount, and finding that it was well within his limit, settled for buying all seven of them.

Harry watched the surprised salesman pack six of his selections and played with the seventh, sliding it up and down his arm. He wondered if he had suddenly got a fixation with the number seven. So far he had bought seven pairs of boxers, bonded to seven house-elves and now was buying seven watches. As Harry handed his card to pay the bill (barely flinching at the six thousand five hundred Pound total he had racked up) he decided that it was all in his imagination.

It was about seven by Harry's new Saturday Watch when he had finally returned to his room. Taking out his wand, he placed a bevy of useful charms on his watches before stashing them away, now unbreakable, scratch proof and capable of coming out of a volcano or the deepest ocean completely intact and functioning with an anti-theft charm that nobody would want to get on the wrong side of.

He changed his clothes and headed out for the night. After a satisfying dinner and wandering the streets for a bit, he headed back to his room, where after performing his nightly routine, he settled down to clear his mind before going to sleep. While he no longer had visions from dear old Tom, he still was susceptible to weird dreams and nightmares as his first night in Privet Drive had proven.

Harry had noticed that organising his mind had also lowered the amount of sleep he needed to get in a night. So far he was down to five hours, and hoped to reduce it even more when he had fully organised his mind.

As he lay in bed waiting for sleep to claim him, Harry mulled over the past few days. He had sort of built up a routine. Every morning he would get up early to jog around the block, increasing his distance and stamina. He would then head to the clearing where after a few stretches, he would do a few push ups, pull ups, and crunches. Then he would jog back to an unnoticed spot near Number Four and Apparate back to his room, have a bath and after a large breakfast, spend some time organising his past memories.

He would then head back to the clearing and practise some of his magic till lunch. After that, he would practise more magic till dinnertime. Then, practically exhausted, he would slip into bed; clearing his mind and going to sleep. He decided to lighten up on the weekends, electing to spend the afternoons and nights just loitering around and enjoying the summer.

Harry woke up on Sunday with a letter from Gringotts. After apologising about the delay in replying to the letter Harry had sent before school had closed, Gornuk had rescheduled the meeting they were supposed to have to the 20th of July at ten. Making a note of the change, Harry headed back out for the day.

Coming back in the afternoon and finding the house empty, Harry decided to start on some of his payback.

He started at Dudley's room. He had picked some vague thoughts from the fat boy's mind about schoolwork the last time he had seen him and wanted to see what it was all about. Entering the room, he headed to the desk drawer associated with those thoughts. After some rifling, he found it; lying there was a large package with the crest of Dudley's school. In it was some makeup work that Dudley had been given in order to be able to write his GCSEs in the coming year along with his report card and a note his school had sent to his parents that he had done appallingly in his coursework. The headmaster had also written about his behaviour too, threatening his immediate expulsion should his grades and attitude fail to improve. Somehow, Dudley had managed to intercept all of that.

Harry had no idea how Dudley had managed that, or what he planned on doing with it, as the school required his parents' signature. Perhaps he was planning on forging it ... that would be amusing once the school found out. But Harry decided that he was looking for more instant and visual gratification. A plan forming in his mind, Harry Apparated out to his old Muggle primary school where he made several copies using the photocopier he remembered being in the staff room. Quickly returning back to Dudley's room, he placed the originals back to where they belonged before slinking off to exact some revenge on his aunt.

Monday morning was heralded by Aunt Petunia's shrieking. Smirking, Harry sauntered down. His aunt was standing just outside the back door looking at her precious garden in horror.

Her once pristine garden that was considered to be the best in the neighbourhood, and the source of her pride and standing, was no longer recognisable. Gone was the green and freshly mowed grass. It was replaced almost overnight by withered yellowed grass which

looked more at home in an abandoned lot. The rose bushes which once were the envy of every housewife of the neighbourhood and pruned to near perfection by a professional landscaper yesterday (not that Petunia would admit to it) had somehow grown out of control. And finally the pride of her garden, her begonias, petunias and agapanthuses were now nearly dying and choked with all the weeds that had sprouted up.

'Like what I've done to your garden?' came the jeering voice of her nephew. Petunia turned around to see him standing inside the house and looking at her with a triumphant expression on his face.

Predictably, Petunia started screeching indignantly at Harry, 'What have you done to my garden you stupid boy! You fix this right now!'

'Or you'll do what? Screech at me even more?' said Harry sardonically. 'You got that garden through the fruits of my labour. You were so happy in showing it off to your neighbours, taking all the credit for my work! So I thought that it would only be fair that I put it back to what it should have been under your care. A pathetic Muggle garden!' he spat the last bit out.

Either his aunt was unperturbed by his voice or she was unused to having her nephew defy her so openly, because she did not lose the glare that used to intimidate Harry when he was younger. Marching up to him, she poked her finger in his chest and said menacingly, 'You better fix that garden right now boy, and after that, you can start repainting the fence. I've had it with your insolence. We've been nothing but kind and generous towards you, undeserving as you are. We have clothed and fed you have put a roof over your head! It's time you start earning your keep around the house. Now change back into the clothes we have provided for you and get to work, you ungrateful brat! I don't know what you have done to get those clothes and I will not stand for it.'

Harry noticed that she now reached up to his chest, and had to look up at him to meet his eyes. Not subdued in the least by her tirade he very calmly and with deliberate coldness said, 'No.'

Completely thrown over this unexpected reply, Petunia took a moment to screech out a, 'what did you say?'

'I said, no you stupid horse! You call yourselves kind and generous? Ha, what a load of shite! While that fat blubbering brat you call a son had two rooms for himself and his broken toys, I had to make do with the fucking cupboard underneath the stairs! The only reason I got that room was because that son of a whore husband of yours thought that he was being watched! And to top it all, you tried to make it into my jail cell as well! As for the food; you make me cook your food, and then you have the gall to deny that to me as well! What little I get happens to be either stale, left over, or burnt! All the clothes I got were that fat pig's cast offs which were four times bigger than me at the very least! So don't give me that tripe about your generosity. As for "earning my keep", you bastards have made me your virtual slave all the years I have been here, while that idiot son of yours has been lollygagging around. I bet the only reason you let me in the house is because of the protection you have been offered. I even bet there is also some money involved in it!' Seeing her flinch, Harry knew that he had hit the proverbial nail in the head.

Recovering quickly, his aunt snarled raising her hand, 'How dare you!'

However, before she could follow through, Harry easily caught her arm. Squeezing it hard enough to make her wince, he pushed her away from him a little before viciously backhanding her, sending her to the floor.

'Hurts, doesn't it?' he said softly, rubbing his knuckles as he looked down on her clutching her face. 'Then again, I doubt it's that bad, considering the number of times you have taken a frying pan to my head.' He loomed over her, enjoying the emerging fear in her eyes as he whispered, 'The next time you try to touch me, you'll be able to see firsthand if the frying pan hurts more. I'll see to it!'

Looking at the bruise forming on her face, he said mockingly, 'Oh we can't have that! What will the neighbours say?' With that he removed his wand and nonchalantly cast a Glamour charm on her arm and face, ignoring her violent flinch. Seeing that he had done a good job covering the bruises, he nodded to himself satisfactorily. 'Now you won't be able to say anything to anybody because you have no proof! Not that I would try it, since otherwise, you'd really be able to see what pain truly feels like! But just to make sure,' he cast a mild sealing charm on her. It wasn't considered dark since it could easily

be broken in time by a person's core magic. Something he was confident Petunia didn't have being a Muggle.

Chuckling darkly, he left her on the floor and headed towards the clearing for his daily routine. He felt satisfied that he had got some revenge against his aunt. After finishing a large lunch, he activated his necklace and Apparated directly outside his uncle's office in Grunnings; casting a one way transparency charm on the door, he noted that his uncle had gone out for lunch, and if his calculations were right, would be gone for quite a while. Instead of opening the door, Harry directly Apparated into his uncle's office, cancelling the charm on the door. He didn't want anybody to notice the door opening or closing or noticing an oddly transparent door.

Once inside, he unlocked the drawers in his uncle's desk. While rifling through Vernon's mind, he had figured out that he was going to give an important presentation to some wealthy foreign clients. It would be a shame if Vernon didn't have the right documents...

Finally finding the files he had been looking for, Harry replaced the packets of notes that were intended for the clients with copies of the stuff he had copied from Dudley's room. Resealing the envelopes with magic, Harry disappeared from the office. He was really looking forward to the show tonight.

Harry wasn't disappointed. Vernon had come home in a towering rage. Only this time that rage wasn't directed on his nephew. No, for the first time, he actually was angry with his own son.

The minute Harry heard his uncle's car approaching he put on his cloak and sat down at the top of the stairs with his wand ready.

He expected his uncle to stomp through the front door completely livid holding the offending notes. He anticipated the bellow of 'Where's that boy!' to echo around the house shaking it to its foundation.

What he didn't expect was Vernon to be referring to Dudley instead of him. Harry watched the unfolding drama with fascination as his aunt replied with the predictable, 'Out having tea with his friends.'

As the elder Dursleys moved to the kitchen, he silently and invisibly snuck in behind them. He watched as Vernon showed Petunia the documents he had seen that were replaced with his notes. Harry almost felt sorry for his relatives for the ugly truth they had been confronted with regards to their son as he looked at Petunia's face cycle through annoyance, confusion, anger and finally disappointment.

Just as things couldn't get worse for Dudley, the phone rang. Vernon went to the living room to answer it. After a bit of heated discussion, he came back even mad than before.

Aunt Petunia looked at him in concern for a few minutes, 'What is wrong dear? Who was that on the phone?' she inquired hesitatingly

After a few minutes spent fuming, Vernon answered, 'It was the police. It seems that your son has been arrested for vandalising public property. He and his mates were also sloshed and if that weren't enough, they tried to assault a police officer! Our own son!'

'They must have made a mistake! He wouldn't have done anything like that! Dudley is a good boy!' wailed Aunt Petunia disbelievingly. Harry snorted softly to himself; they really were blind to that fat pig's faults.

'Oh it gets better,' said Vernon, 'Turns out that when they reached the station, there was a gentleman already there complaining about some yobs throwing stones at passing cars, and had heavily dented his. He was registering a complaint when he saw Dudley and his friends come in. Apparently, he recognised and identified them as the ones behind it!'

Horried, Petunia said, 'He must have been mistaken! Oh Vernon, let's go there right now and get Dudders out from that horrible place! God only knows what our poor baby might be exposed to in there.'

'We can't Pet,' said Vernon defeated, 'The magistrate's not going to be in the office till tomorrow morning at ten. It looks like Dudley will have to rough it out for the night.'

Petunia immediately started lamenting about the different horrors her precious Dinky Diddidums would be exposed to over the night getting more and more hysterical. Harry then decided he needed to

leave. It had definitely become boring now that Petunia was losing her senses.

The real fun began the next day. After Harry had finished his lunch, he saw his uncle's car go by. Not wasting any time, he immediately Apparated to his room and settled down on the top of the staircase where he had a good view of the front door.

Harry watched with interest as his Aunt opened the door to admit one pissed off Vernon Dursley followed by a meek Dudley. Ushering them into the kitchen, his aunt closed the door where the shouting match of a lifetime had begun making it completely unnecessary for Harry to cast any of the eavesdropping charms he had learnt.

It turned out that the car Dudley had damaged happened to be worth over half a million quid. To add to it, it was also brand new and had just been released in the market. So to say that the owner was angry over the windshield being smashed in was a gross understatement. And to top it all off, that man happened to be a friend of a friend of Albert Grunning, Uncle Vernon's boss.

All in all, things were definitely not looking up for Vernon, because the one thing you never do is antagonise a person who could probably knock you flat with only his wallet. Not only did Vernon have to pay the man for his damaged Lamborghini (a hefty sum in itself) but he also had to pay the hefty fine for the damage Dudley and his friends had caused to the play park. In addition to that, the four of them would have to serve time fixing the damage they had wreaked. The magistrate was rather pissed off at the numerous complaints that had come in over the past year about the destruction of that park and now that the perpetrators had been caught, he had really thrown the book at them.

The only consolation that could be found here was that Piers', Malcolm's and Gordon's parents also had to share the cost of the fine as well as the lawsuit. Otherwise, as Vernon had exclaimed rather loudly to his son, they would all be broke and 'Forced into the streets you stupid boy!'

True, they could all appeal against it, but the parents wanted to keep it all quiet, and a public trial would ensure the opposite happened. Besides, according to Vernon as he explained it to his wife, their

lawyers had strongly suggested against it as the case was airtight. Better to cough up now rather than risk paying an even larger amount and possible public humiliation.

Then after that came the inquisition about Dudley's marks and performance in school. There was even more yelling (from Vernon), screeching and subsequent crying (from Petunia) from the mumbled excuses that Harry could hear coming from his cousin which he had no doubt were utterly lame.

Eventually came the verdict; Dudley found himself (to his mute horror) actually grounded to his room for the first time in his short life for the rest of the summer with his television and computer games being removed and his internet privileges strictly monitored. The only time he would be allowed outside would be to go to the loo. And the only time he was allowed outside the house was when the constables had come to pick him up to supervise his sentence.

Of course this led to even more shouting (this time from Dudley as well as Vernon), screeching, and crying. Dudley even tried to throw a tantrum, but it seemed that Vernon had more than enough as Harry suddenly saw the door being flung open. Quickly darting to his room, he activated his necklace before watching in fascination as a red faced and furious Vernon struggled up the stairs, dragging Dudley by the ear and into his room much to Dudley's vocal protestation.

Chuckling to himself, Harry secured his door from entry by any mad Muggles and Apparated out back to his clearing to continue his routine very much pleased about things.

Over the next few days news had spread like wildfire thanks to the gossipy housewives about Dudley's arrest along with three of his friends and their subsequent punishment. The children that once were terrorised by the gang were now gleefully swapping stories about what their parents had done to the miscreants. The four were now rather subdued whenever seen in public. Though Dudley had been harshly punished (in his opinion) he had been let off rather lightly relatively speaking. Piers and Malcolm found it rather hard to sit for a week and were routinely tormented by some of the braver kids who had taken great glee in flicking their tenderised bottoms and watching them wince when the constable on duty was not looking (which was, conveniently, quite often).

Harry used this opportunity to practise his stealth and accuracy. He would skulk around at a distance watching Dudley and his friends work and send out stinging hexes surreptitiously ensuring that Piers and Malcolm were uncomfortable for a much longer time than normal. He also worked on timing them just right so that it seemed that it was the children who were behind the entire thing. Though there were some moments where his targets and their tormentors had become slightly suspicious, nobody had ever suspected Harry.

Harry also found his standing with the residents changing as well. After one neighbour had inquired about "the Potter boy" to the policeman who was supervising Dudley and his gang, news had also spread that there was no record of any Harry Potter from Little Whinging ever attending St. Brutus' Secure Centre for Incurably Criminal Boys.

Almost overnight, and eerily reminiscent of the end of his fifth year, Harry found his status changing from a hardened hooligan to a hero. Especially when ten year old Mark Evans (who was about to turn eleven in a few days, by the way) made it known that it was Harry who had saved him from being beaten to a pulp by Dudley and his gang. His reputation was further enhanced when he was seen hanging around and watching the miscreants with an eagle eye. The neighbours got the impression that Harry was ensuring that the hooligans weren't about to do something unsavoury. This however, only served to irritate Harry a lot. The Muggles weren't any better than the wizarding world after all. Not. One. Bit! Just like Fudge and his ministry, it took having the facts being shoved right in front of their noses for the Muggles to realise the truth.

Things in Number Four, however, were tense. Dudley had already been caught once trying to sneak out of the window, though a more accurate term would be "stuck" as Dudley had not been able to fully fit through the window in his bid for freedom. The entire neighbourhood was treated to the sight of his fat bottom sticking out of the window the next morning as he had inexplicably fallen asleep in that position after futile attempts at getting unstuck.

A furious Vernon had to call in the fire department to get his son unstuck causing quite a spectacle in the neighbourhood much to Petunia's embarrassment and Harry's unbridled joy. The upshot of

the whole incident was that Dudley had been relegated to the guest room while his window had to be fixed back. He was then put on a strict diet by his uncompromising and unsympathetic mother. It seems that Dudley had finally managed to cross a line with Petunia Dursley as she did not force anybody else to follow the same diet (much to her husband's relief).

The Dursleys had all decided to avoid Harry at all costs. Vernon now went to work even earlier and returned even later than normal for his position as he had to do a lot of scrambling and arse-licking to keep his job.

Petunia was now terrified of her nephew ever since Harry had shown his mean streak. She would scramble out of any room that Harry would enter, not meeting his eyes and would jump at any noise or sudden movement made by him. Something that Harry took great pleasure in.

Dudley was now relegated to his room without any distractions leaving him no choice but to study, though Harry suspected that he may have been staring into space the entire time.

All in all, Harry really was enjoying the summer at Privet Drive. Though he was slightly disappointed that he never did get to fully use the book he had bought. Perhaps he could get some more vengeance on Dudley's gang? Piers, Gordon and Malcolm would have finished serving time in their respective rooms (though they still had to repair the play park). Harry might have some more fun with the boys who had tormented him for ten years of his life.

The twelfth of July saw Harry putting on a cloak over his t-shirt and jeans and Apparating to Diagon Alley.

It was a Saturday and Harry had just finished his morning regimen. He had grown bored with hanging around the same streets and shops around his neighbourhood and was looking for a change of scene.

Having appeared in Diagon Alley, he immediately activated his necklace before setting off. As he was walking the streets, he noticed a slight difference in the alley. From what Harry could gather from the Prophet, Voldemort had yet to attack ever since his return was announced by the Ministry and this had put everybody on edge.

Adding to that unease was Fudge's desperate attempts at staying in power. Harry figured that Fudge would be out soon if the stories were anything to go by. The public was baying for the incompetent minister's blood and a vote of no-confidence was imminent. The only thing keeping Fudge in office right now was that his replacement had yet to be elected. So far it was a tie between Amelia Bones and Rufus Scrimgeour, though that was speculated to change very shortly. This, Harry supposed, was the reason for the underlying tension that he could sense in the crowd of shoppers in the alley.

He picked up a few introductory texts on Runes and Arithmancy at Flourish and Blotts to see if it caught his fancy. Perhaps if he was any good at it, or found it interesting enough, he could think about taking the OWL course when he returned back to school. He knew that he probably would end up sitting with third years, but that didn't really bother him.

Harry also bought a book on some household spells. Recently he had found that his clothes were beginning to get a little small as he had filled out some. While his elves were more than happy to fix that problem, he was still intrigued at what a clothes altering charm could do. It might come in handy in a duel to have his opponent stumbling around in oversized robes. Who knew; there might be other spells worth using there too.

As he exited the bookstore, he noticed a figure. The man's face was nondescript and you normally wouldn't be able to spot him in a crowd, but something in his demeanour caught Harry's attention.

Ensuring that the charms on his necklace were active, he followed the man, careful to keep his distance.

Seeing his mark slip into Knockturn Alley, Harry flipped up the hood of his cloak hoping that he did not seem too suspicious and silently vowing to carry his Invisibility cloak everywhere he went. He did not know how he knew that person or why he was following him, but something about his posture and the way he walked seemed oddly familiar to Harry.

The man stopped at a small seedy looking pub with the head of a raven in its sign. Harry quickly and silently hit the man with an Eavesdropping Charm just as he was about to slip in. He knew that following the man into the pub might not be a good idea as one slip could reveal the Muggle clothing underneath his cloak and that was bound to be noticed as all the patrons would be looking at him the minute he opened that door.

Harry slipped out of the main street and casually leant against the wall of the pub to listen to the impending conversation, concentrating on holding the charm.

'What news do you have for me Worm?' growled a deep gravelly voice.

'T-the Master has a task for you, Mr. Greyback' replied the first man in a high squeaky voice trying and failing to sound confident. Harry nearly lost concentration upon recognising that voice; it was Wormtail! The snivelling bastard that had betrayed his parents framed his godfather and finally used Harry to resurrect Voldemort. With great difficulty Harry managed to control his first instinct to rush in to capture the traitor. Now was not the time to go rushing headlong into things. He turned his attention back to maintaining the charm and listening to the conversation.

'-get the old wand maker for Our Lord, you are to attack the Bones' Residence and kill all the inhabitants and their body guards. Auror Roberts will be assisting you in circumventing the wards. You are to leave him behind alive. Make it look like he was the lone survivor,' said Wormtail.

His menacing companion, now identified as Greyback chuckled darkly, 'I hear that her niece is going to be there as well. Delicious! I will enjoy feasting on her virgin flesh!'

Harry heard Wormtail squeak at that line in what he thought was a lot of fear and a tiny hint of revulsion.

Greyback chuckled menacingly, 'Run back to The Master and tell him that the Bones family will finally be extinct before the full moon sets. I will personally see to it.' there was a short pause, 'what are you doing, you stupid rat? Stop staring at me like a twit and move it before I decide to have you as an appetizer!' The man growled.

Wormtail squeaked and scrambled to his feet. Harry could tell that the man had been staring at his companion for a whole minute before being galvanised into action. The charm was suddenly cut off indicating that Pettigrew had gone out of range of the charm.

Bringing himself back to reality, Harry made his way towards Diagon Alley as fast as possible. He had to find a way to warn Susan and her aunt about the impending attack on their home. As he passed by Ollivander's shop he remembered a part of the conversation. Realising that the "old wand-maker" being referred to could only be Ollivander, Harry hurried into the store.

'Mr. Ollivander?' he called out as soon as he entered inside looking frantically for the man.

'Ah Mr. Potter, I hope that everything is all right with your wand?' came the ethereal voice of Ollivander as he suddenly appeared from the depths of his shop.

Harry hastily stopped the man from saying anything more, 'My wand's fine Mr. Ollivander. Aside from the fact that I won't be able to use it to fight against Voldemort properly, it's in perfect condition. But forget about that, I came here to warn you. I just heard that Voldemort had ordered your capture. They might even come for you tonight!'

Ollivander gave Harry a piercing look 'Indeed?' He said, 'then I owe you a debt of gratitude Mr. Potter, I shall take the necessary precautions.'

'So will you be leaving the country?' asked Harry curiously.

'Oh no Mr. Potter, I fully intend to stay at my shop, just as my ancestors have ever since the beginning of my family's business. We have weathered many Dark Lords in our time, and this one is not going to be shutting the business down. No, I intend to raise the family wards back up again for the first time in four hundred years. A regrettable decision, but we must do what we must in these times. Nobody with ill intent will ever be able to set foot into my shop.' Ollivander paused to take a breath, 'If there is nothing else Mr. Potter, perhaps I can take your leave? Raising the wards will take time that I do not have to waste.'

'Er, no Mr. Ollivander. I think I shall be on my way now,' Said Harry slightly unsettled at the calm tone Ollivander was using. He turned around, but before he could step outside, he was stopped with a sharp 'Just what do you think you are doing, young man?'

'Sorry?' asked Harry nonplussed as he turned around to see a crazed look on the wand-maker's face.

'This!' Said Ollivander, as he strode forward and plucked out Harry's wand from the back pocket of his trousers. Holding it under Harry's nose, he continued with a quiet fury, 'Are you thick or something boy! You do not stick a wand in your back pocket! Especially with the handle pointing outwards! You are lucky you haven't blown your scrawny arse off yet!'

Harry quailed under the shorter man's sudden fury. 'I didn't know that,' he said haltingly. 'They never told me that at school! Besides, where am I supposed to carry it and be able to draw it at a moment's notice?' he added in his voice slowly taking an indignant tone.

'Do not take that tone with me young man.' Said Ollivander dangerously, he took Harry's ear and twisted it painfully, bringing it close to him causing the taller teen to stoop with a yelp 'Just because nobody told you does not mean that you don't take the initiative yourself. The books for wand safety and care are readily available at Flourish and Blotts, if you had cared to look.' He whispered waspishly into the ear in his hand as he gave it another twist.

'Ow! All right, all right, let go!' said Harry as he winced at the pain in his ear. The last time his ear was twisted so painfully was when he and Ron had been caught out of bed by McGonagall in the Christmas holidays in their Second Year the night after the Polyjuice Potion incident. She had proceeded to drag them up three floors by their ears giving them a tongue lashing all the way to her office. But even that did not compare to what he was feeling now.

Ollivander suddenly let go of Harry's ear and with a sharp 'Stay here!' moved to the back of his shop muttering underneath his breath about "kids these days" and how disrespectful and lazy they were becoming off late.

Harry stood there at the front of the shop rubbing his smarting ear and muttering about crazy old men. He abruptly stopped as he heard Ollivander call out from the back, 'I heard that!'

Ollivander then came out carrying a bundle. Banging it onto the table, he beckoned Harry over impatiently and said, 'This is a wand holster generally used by duellists. You place it on the underside of your forearm where it attaches itself by a sticking charm and put your wand inside it. You can draw your wand out quickly just by willing it into your hand. How quick is up to you. You will, naturally need to practise with it to decrease your draw time. I have calibrated it to your wand and forearm size. Now put it on this instant and if I ever find out that you have stuck your wand in your back pocket again, you will wish that the wand had blown your buttocks off after I'm through with them! Am I clear?'

Harry nodded rapidly, his face flushed in embarrassment at the implications of Ollivander's statement as he put on the holster and placed his wand inside.

'This one is a premium holster made of Basilisk hide imported from the continent lined with Demiguise hair and Acromantula silk and sewn together with Unicorn hair. As long as the holster is on your wrist, it will stay invisible and intangible and can only be removed by you.' said Ollivander. He then proceeded to show Harry how to draw his wand out from his holster till he was satisfied Harry had it down pat. After charging Harry 100 Galleons for the holster and a further 10 Galleons for a book on wand care, he sent Harry off with another warning and a well placed stinging hex that had Harry flying out of the shop rubbing his bum.

Harry stood outside the shop rubbing his ear with one hand and his rear with another. He was sure that the old man had raised a welt with that stinging hex.

Looking around he suddenly spotted Susan Bones and Hannah Abbot walking into Florean Fortescue's.

His pain momentarily forgotten, Harry followed the two girls in. Spotting them at a table, he made his way down and plopped himself down at the table only to be painfully reminded of his encounter with Ollivander.

The girls looked up in surprise at the sudden intrusion. It took them a few minutes before recognising the person in front of them, 'Harry?' exclaimed Susan, 'Is that really you?'

'Yeah,' said Harry barely suppressing a grimace upon sitting down so hard

'Wow, you've grown!' Said Hannah, looking openly at him, 'And you have gotten rid of your glasses too!' she said appreciatively, eyeing him with a peculiar look on her face.

Susan elbowed Hannah in the ribs and turned to Harry, 'Fancy seeing you here Mr. Potter. What can the two of us do for the Chosen One?' she said saucily.

Harry rolled his eyes at her reference to the latest title the Daily Prophet had come up with when they weren't occupied with who was going to be Minister. Before he could open his mouth however, Hannah interjected with a question, 'what happened to your ear?'

Blushing, Harry fingered his still red ear and quickly said, 'Never you mind,' turning to Susan he said urgently, 'Susan, I have something I need to tell you; I have just heard that Death Eaters plan on attacking your house tomorrow night. You and your aunt need to get the hell out of there!'

Susan's playful expression immediately vanished. 'Are you sure?' she asked with a seriousness that was alien on her normally cheerful and optimistic face. Harry just nodded in reply.

'Well, there really is nothing much to worry about' said Hannah after a small pause, 'Your Aunt's bodyguards and your family wards will be able to keep them at bay till help arrives.'

'Actually that is another problem.' Said Harry gravely, 'Susan, you have a traitor within your guard. A man called Roberts I think. He is going to help them get around the wards.'

At this new piece of information, Susan paled dramatically. 'No' she whispered.

'Yes,' replied Harry, 'a man called Greyback or something is going to be leading the team.'

'Greyback? You don't mean Fenrir Greyback!' squeaked both the girls in horror.

'I wouldn't know,' said Harry warily, 'I only heard his last name. Why, does it matter?'

'Because Fenrir Greyback is the most feared werewolf in the whole of Britain,' said Susan in a small voice. 'All pureblood children have grown up hearing horror stories about Greyback. He was supposed to have disappeared around sixteen years ago.'

'Well, judging by his remarks about eating your virgin flesh Susan, I think it may be that person.' Said Harry dryly, remembering what he had heard the man say.

Susan looked mildly disgusted at this piece of news, 'I have to tell aunty as soon as possible.' Looking around she said to herself with a hint of frustration colouring her voice, 'Where the hell is that Tonks when you need her!'

Harry perked up at the name, 'Tonks? Why would you be meeting Tonks?' he asked warily.

'Oh she's a part of the detail protecting us. She's supposed to be escorting us actually and told us she'd meet us here. Why, do you know her?' asked Susan.

'Bugger,' Harry cursed looking around in panic. 'Listen, when Tonks gets here, tell her everything and tell her to alert the Order-' Seeing

the look of confusion on her face he carried on, 'Don't worry about that, she'll know what you will be talking about. Just tell her that and get to your house as fast as possible. Oh and don't tell Tonks that I was here. In fact don't tell anybody that I gave that information to you. Now I gotta go.' With that he bolted out of the parlour and into the street leaving two very confused witches spluttering after him.

Harry was out just in time for he saw Tonks enter at just that moment, her bright pink hair rather distinguishable. Harry quickly Disapparated to his room and collapsed onto his bed exhaling in relief. That had been close he thought. He winced as his backside throbbed again. Getting up, he stood in front of the mirror to examine the damage letting his trousers and pants pool at his feet. Crazy old man he thought as he saw the livid red welt there. He drew his wand out into his hand with a flick of his wrist and a thrust of his arm marvelling at the action. Stepping out of his pants, he searched his books for some healing spells.

Finding a bruise healing spell he tried casting it on himself and was satisfied at the results. Harry smiled in smug satisfaction at the results and thanked his lucky stars that he had the foresight to buy that book on household charms.

Harry was ready at around half past nine for his appointment with Gornuk on the Twentieth. Not wasting any time, he pocketed his invisibility cloak and Apparated to Diagon Alley where he quickly made his way towards Gringotts.

He was around ten minutes early for his appointment as he was ushered into Gornuk's office.

'Ah Mr. Potter-Black, you are early. Please, sit down. We will have to wait for Grimjaw.'

Grimjaw chose that moment to enter. He took one look at Harry and said, 'It seems that our suspicions were right. The ritual took less time than usual to reach its full completion.'

'That's good right?' said Harry nervously.

'It doesn't matter,' said Gornuk dismissively. 'What matters is the end result, and it definitely looks like it has been successful as you can see from the change in your appearance.'

Harry just nodded silently, unwilling to admit out loud that he hadn't had any time to look at his face in the mirror. Sure the first three days after the ritual he had spent a long time studying his reflection trying to see if he had changed any, but after being compared by a grinning Seamus to Parvati and Lavender, he had stopped.

Though Harry no longer had any grudge with his Irish dorm-mate; he had gotten his revenge in the end after all. The story of Seamus' bedwetting incident had spread like wildfire through Gryffindor house. Harry supposed that was why people didn't recognise him much at first glance in the alley as he remembered with a jolt that he had forgotten to activate the necklace.

'We'll need to verify the results of the ritual of course,' Said Grimjaw bringing Harry back to reality, he gave Harry a dagger, 'Some of your blood should do it nicely.'

Nodding, Harry drew the dagger over his left palm wincing slightly. Handing the bloodstained dagger to Grimjaw, he took his wand out to heal the wound, thankful that he had already learnt that spell. After his encounter with Ollivander, he had made it a point to learn all the healing spells he could find in his books. So far, he could mend minor cuts and bruises with ease and was hoping to graduate to learning how to mend broken bones and dislocated joints, after getting the right books of course. Dudley had been a rather "willing" participant in Harry's endeavours to learn those spells (in addition to the spells that called for the need to use those healing spells in the first place) after all...

His wound healed, Harry turned his attention back to an amused Grimjaw. 'You know, Mr. Potter-Black, a drop would have been more than enough.'

'Oh,' said Harry turning red, 'then why give me such a huge dagger?'

'Because,' the goblin said indifferently, 'that happened to be the only sharp instrument in my possession. It's not like I carry needles on my person.' He said sarcastically.

Gornuk cleared his throat interrupting Harry before he could open his mouth to argue further. Taking the dagger, he wiped it on a

special sheet of parchment that was fairly shimmering with magic causing it to glow white and slowly start to expand.

'We use this to trace the heritage of a person Mr. Potter-Black.' He said at Harry's inquiring gaze. 'If the ritual has been successful, it will show the late Sirius Black as your magically adoptive father. And it may indicate any claims you can make to any other families should they appear.'

At this Gornuk looked back down at the roll of parchment that had stopped glowing. He studied it for a long moment, saying nothing with a blank expression on his face, looking remarkably like a particularly ugly wax statue Harry had once seen in a shop. Only when he was interrupted by an impatient Grimjaw, Harry realised that it was a look of frank disbelief on Gornuk's face.

'Interesting' said Gornuk looking up he said something to Grimjaw in Gobbledegook that sparked off a heated conversation between the two goblins who had crowded together behind Gornuk's desk looking at the document in front of them in fascination (and if Harry wasn't imagining it) disbelief.

Harry couldn't take the suspense anymore, 'What is it?'

'Well, Mr. Potter-Black, when a person undergoes magical adoption, their family tree just shows the adoptive parent and the blood relatives of the person, if they are magical-the parchment cannot detect Muggle ancestors.' Gornuk paused to take a breath. 'So basically, it should be showing only the dearly departed Lord Black's name in blue just below your parents' name.'

'So what happened here? Did the name not come? I thought that the ritual was successful ...' said Harry after a short uncomfortable pause

'The name appeared,' said Grimjaw, 'but not in the way we were expecting.' With that he handed the roll of parchment to Harry.

Harry took a deep breath and slowly opened the now six feet long roll of parchment and spread it across Gornuk's expansive desk. Squinting at the tiny writing filled to the brim with names and lines detailing his family history, he looked at the end of it and sure enough, saw his godfather's name just below James Potter.

Then he saw what had the goblins worried. Sirius' name wasn't in blue, it was in red. The same colour as that of his parents.

Just as Harry slowly comprehended this fact, he noticed something else that promptly threw him for another loop; just next to and above Sirius' name were the names of his brother, cousin sisters, and their families. Add to that were the names of Sirius' ancestors as well. Some of which Harry remembered to have seen on the tapestry in Number 12.

'What does this mean?' said Harry tentatively, mesmerised by the names of the Black Family written there.

A short pause later, Gornuk said slowly, 'We think that this means that somehow, in some inexplicable way, you are now truly as much a Black as well as a Potter.'

'Huh?' said Harry eloquently, looking up from the name Alphard Black to stare at the goblins in confusion, 'What do you mean?'

'Well, as far as your family tree is concerned, you are not adopted but born a Black. How this happened I do not know, but the results are better than expected.'

Well, thought Harry, looks like Sirius is actually my father in all sense of the word. Pulling himself together quicker than before, Harry said, 'So does this change anything besides the obvious?'

'Yes, normally if the head of an Ancient and Noble House was adopted, then he would only have authority over members of the house who are in his generation and after and additionally cannot claim to be related to any siblings of his adopted sire unless acknowledged by them first. For example, if the ritual had gone as expected, you would only have authority over Draco Malfoy, and that would be limited since he is a scion of the House of Malfoy. However, taking in the, ah, enhanced nature of the results of this ritual, you have full authority over all the members of your house. Also, you can claim full relationship over any of his siblings. Of whom the only surviving ones are-'

'-Narcissa Malfoy, Bellatrix Lestrange and Andromeda Tonks' interrupted Harry in a faint voice.

'Yes, though they would be Aunt Narcissa and Aunt Bellatrix to you.' said Grimjaw with amusement colouring his voice. 'As for Andromeda Tonks nee Black, well, she would only be Aunt Andromeda to you if you were to overturn her banishment and restore her status in the Black Family. Right now she and her family are persona non grata in the family.' He said after giving it some thought.

In his excitement and happiness over being considered Sirius' son, Harry really hadn't given much thought over the family he was going to be getting as well. Now, the full ramifications of his choice hit him. Not that he would change anything, but still ... he looked at the family tree again, 'this cannot be right. According to the tree Andromeda, Narcissa and Bellatrix are cousins of Sirius'. So they would be my second cousins, not my aunts,' he said hopefully.

'Unfortunately Mr. Potter-Black, in wizarding culture your parents' first cousins are considered your aunts and uncles just like any of your parents' siblings. Thus they are still Aunt Narcissa and Aunt Bellatrix to you.' Harry sighed in resignation at that, it looked like he had no choice, for better or worse Bellatrix was now his aunt.

Pulling himself together and promising to deal with the whole thing later, Harry said, 'What kind of authority would I have over them?'

'That can only be explained to you once you become the head,' said Grimjaw.

'And how would I go about doing that?' Harry inquired.

'According to the instructions left by previous heads of both the families, after eleven months and two weeks of being declared an adult, the heir gains partial headship. This basically means that they can make decisions concerning the family. We have gone through your records and have found that you have been all but declared an adult as far as the Ministry is concerned last year on the Second of August when the Wizengamot was forced by the former minister to try you as an adult on the Twelfth of the same month. Thus you should be able to claim partial headship of both your houses. We apologise for the delay, but we were only able to obtain your records yesterday with great difficulty. It seemed that the former minister was quite bent on hiding any and all records of that trial.'

Harry took some time to digest this piece of information. Fudge's failed plan to expel him had been advantageous for Harry after all! He only wished he knew of that fact earlier. Then he could have forced the Ministry to treat him as an adult.

Oh well, no use crying over spilled potion. And it wasn't as if that twit could do anything about it as he had just recently been replaced (much to Harry's immense satisfaction) by Amelia Bones who had won the office by a landslide. The main reason for her new found popularity being that apparently upon receiving the tip from the "anonymous source" she had proceeded to set an ambush using some of her most trusted Aurors. In the resulting conflict, five Werewolves had been killed and it was rumoured that their leader, the notorious Fenrir Greyback had been defeated personally by Amelia herself.

With a shake of his head, Harry brought his mind back to the matter at hand, 'So what does partial headship entail, and when will I be able to get full headship?'

'As I mentioned earlier, partial headship means that you can make decisions pertaining only to the family itself. For example, you can now make major decisions regarding your finances. Full headship is obtained only three years from the date of claiming partial headship. In your case that will be today in the year Two thousand and five if you so choose to claim partial headship now. On that date, you will be able to claim your titles of Earl of Potter and Baron Black and will be able to claim your seats in the Wizengamot.'

Grimjaw and Gornuk then placed two ornate wooden boxes in front of Harry embroidered with the crests of the Potter and the Black families. As Harry reached his hand out towards the boxes, the lids melted away to reveal the rings within. Harry gazed upon the ornate rings of both the houses he would soon be head of.

Harry picked up the Potter Ring; it was large, made of Platinum with the Potter crest engraved into a large clear blue diamond seamlessly set into the ring by what could only be a serious piece of magic, 'I, Harry James Potter-Black, heir of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter do solemnly swear to uphold the values and traditions of my family. With this ring I acknowledge my responsibilities to the family and its members. As its head this family

will flourish and grow under my hand; this I swear, so mote it be.' Maybe it was the ring or some other mysterious force, for instinct guided Harry to utter those words as he put the ring on his right ring finger. The ring flashed a bright gold before resizing to fit Harry's finger, leaving Harry with a sense of belonging and an influx of knowledge of his family properties.

Recovering from that quickly, Harry took the Black Ring; it was just as large as the Potter Ring but made of white gold with the Black Crest engraved in white into a large, clear Black Diamond set into the ring. Harry followed the same strange instinct and roughly repeated the oath before placing that ring on his right pointer finger.

The ring flashed bright silver before resizing as well. This time however, Harry also got an influx of knowledge of the state of health of the other recognised members of the Black Family; namely his three aunts and one cousin, with a distant echo of his uncles by marriage.

'Now, to answer your previous question,' said Grimjaw, 'since you are the full heir, and now the Head of your house, you will be responsible for all the female members of your family. Even though they are married and grown, they still owe their fealty and allegiance to you. Should you choose to disown them, they and their offspring will no longer be considered Blacks and will be known as Blood traitors, and as such will lose all prestige and honour. Understandably this is a very serious decision to take and should not be made lightly. In fact the last time a person was disowned was around a century back. Heads of houses normally banish family members, allowing them to at least keep their names while not being acknowledged by the family.'

Immediately Harry's mind went to Narcissa and Draco. Harry imagined the look on Draco's face should he be told that he and his mother were no longer considered Blacks but Blood traitors. Unbidden a voice in Harry's head asked him if it was something Narcissa deserved. Was it right to make a woman suffer just because of a grudge held against her son? She hadn't done anything to Harry after all. Any and all interactions with the Slytherin were nothing but petty arguments. No, Harry decided, there would be no point in disowning Narcissa just because Draco was an arse. However-

'What do I need to do to disown somebody in the family for their betrayal, and can I reinstate a previously disowned person back into the family? If so, how do I do that?'

'Who would you want to disown and why?' asked Grimjaw while fixing Harry an unreadable look.

'Bellatrix Lestrange,' spat Harry, taking a deep breath he continued in a normal voice, 'as to the why, well, I think killing the previous head of house is reason enough.'

Grimjaw seemed to nod in satisfaction, 'Very well, Mr. Potter-Black, to do that you will have to press the Black family ring on a piece of parchment and say ego exheres, followed by her name while thinking of the reason.' He handed a blank piece of ordinary parchment.

Harry pressed the ring into the parchment and said, 'ego exheres Bellatrix Lestrange.' Immediately a long paragraph in Latin appeared on the blank piece of parchment. Harry could make out his signature at the bottom. Grimjaw took the parchment and said, 'Very well, it has been done. From now on, the woman formerly known as Bellatrix Lestrange is considered a blood traitor for the murder of Sirius Black, the previous head of her house. All possessions in her name shall be moved to the Black Family vault.' Looking at Harry he said, 'As of now, her location is unknown, so Gringotts is unable to notify her of her change in status. Rest assured, Mr. Potter-Black, we shall notify her and her husband as soon as we find her. It will be up to her husband if she is to still be considered a Lestrange by marriage or not.'

Harry could also confirm that fact since he suddenly felt a loss of connection with one aunt and one uncle. He figured that they would be Bellatrix and her husband.

'What about-'

'-Andromeda Tonks? Well, we have with us a formal application submitted to the previous Lord Black to be reintegrated within the family as well as have her daughter recognised as a Black in accordance to custom. However, Lord Black lamentably passed away unable to sign the document giving his consent. As the current head, it is within your power to complete your father's wishes.

Unfortunately, I cannot locate the documents right now as we did not anticipate the ritual giving out these impressive results.'

'Does it change anything else?' Asked Harry

'Well, now that you are the full heir, it also means that any marriage contracts made by your, er, new ancestors will be still active and applicable to you,'

'Marriage contracts?' Harry's voice came out as a squeak to his embarrassment.

'Yes Mr. Potter-Black, marriage contracts,' said a very amused Gornuk.

'So far the Potter family has no outstanding marriage contracts. However, we do not know if there are any in the Blacks. The file had been closed upon your father's passing. Unfortunately considering recent events, we will have to reopen that file. We shall know for certain in three days at the most,' continued Grimjaw with a hint of frustration.

Harry soon got over his shock and said, 'very well, then shall we meet in, say, two days time?' he said, tiredly rubbing his nose.

'It would be for the best,' said Gornuk.

'Then it's settled then.' Said Harry rising, followed by the goblins.

'One other thing, Mr. Potter-Black, said Gornuk, 'Since your mother is a Muggleborn, there is a chance she could have had a squib ancestor. If you wish, we could carry out a full heritage test to see if you can lay claim to any other family.'

'Isn't all that information shown in that parchment?' Harry said, nodding at the document in front of them.

'Not really, this parchment shows your magical ancestry. The limitation of this test is that it cannot detect Muggle or squib ancestors, as they do not have enough magic in them for the test. You could be a direct descendant of Merlin for all you know, but it wouldn't show up here. The test we are suggesting will examine your magic. It is a bit more in-depth and will take about a day. It will

also cost you a thousand Galleons and we cannot guarantee satisfaction,' said Grimjaw.

Harry pondered on it for a moment before giving his assent. Gornuk then called for another goblin who rushed out of the office after receiving instructions in Gobbledegook only to return with a strange looking instrument. Gornuk then used this instrument to draw a litre of Harry's blood. He then sent the slightly dizzy wizard off on his way after giving him a blood replenishing potion.

Harry walked down Diagon Alley in daze. Quickly Apparating to his room, he collapsed on his bed, thinking about all the information that he had just learnt. Especially in regards to who he was related to.

This is just great he thought sarcastically as the full irony of the situation hit him. I have one aunt, one uncle and one cousin who are magic hating bigots on my mother's side, and one uncle, aunt and cousin on my new father's side who are Muggle hating bigots. Come to think of it, both the families are blond. Family reunions will be so much fun! He snorted; suddenly feeling tired and drained even though it was the middle of the afternoon, yet too restless to sleep. Suddenly coming to a decision, he removed his cloak and Apparated out. He really needed to unwind and badly.

Two days later, he found himself badly wanting a drink or ten. It turned out that the Black family had one still active contract with the Greengrass family. So it looked like he would have to shortly marry Daphne Greengrass. Joy. She was the Ice Queen of Slytherin and rumour had it that her gaze was enough to literally freeze anybody in their tracks. Harry had no idea if it was an actual family trait or just rumours. Oh well, might as well get to know her, with that thought, he made a note to start writing letters to her.

And speaking of Slytherin, it turned out that he had a claim to the Slytherin family as well. Somehow, he was related to a family called the Gaunts. Fortunately, he did not see Tom's name there, or he really would be having some issues. The only Gaunt he had a magical connection of sorts to was a Morag Gaunt who had lived roughly five centuries ago. Harry supposed that he was the last magical Gaunt and had subsequently sired a squib which then mixed with Muggles before the magic resurfaced in his mother.

At any rate, he didn't know what had happened to the Slytherin family fortune, properties or titles, though he had a good idea. According to the goblins, the Slytherins were a paranoid bunch, and had stowed all their valuables in a secret chamber. Harry had a really good idea where that was. It looked like he would have to pay another visit to a certain Chamber when he went back to school.

And speaking of the founders, he also had fulfilled another condition to becoming the Earl of Gryffindor. The Potters were the only remaining descendants of Gryffindor by marriage. The last Earl had given his Potter grandson the task of finding Godric's legendary sword which he had hidden. The reward being that if he found it, the title would be passed on to the lad on his twenty-sixth birthday. Well, long story short, that hadn't happened. Until Harry's second year that is. Now all Harry had to do was claim the sword and on the day he turned twenty six, the title would be his. The only thing he would be gaining there would be the seat and title. Everything else had been annexed into the Potter family.

Another less earth shattering yet weird revelation that had left Harry unsettled was when he had gone to look at the Black Family vaults. He had seen a cup which Gornuk claimed was Hufflepuff's Cup and was formerly in Bellatrix Lestrange's vault. The weird thing was that the reaction Harry had when clapping eyes on it:

He was standing over an obese woman wearing a ginger wig with overly powdered cheeks. He savoured the look of disbelief, betrayal and fear in the woman's face before raising his wand. A jet of green light then lanced from his wand into her chest, causing her to crumple to the ground. He then pointed his wand to the cup and felt an excruciating pain in his chest.

The Vision had stopped there, bringing Harry back to reality clutching his chest where he could still feel a phantom pain near his heart. He didn't know what to make of that vision or the Cup and so decided to shelve it for the moment. He did have other things to take care of at the moment.

He had decided to leave both Gornuk and Grimjaw in charge of the Potter and Black investments respectively. It would be easier to maintain and the goblins didn't mind sharing.

Another thing was giving his staff of house-elves work. Of the Potter elves, only four were remaining and they were just barely managing to keep the Potter ancestral home and the townhouses in a liveable condition. The plantations were being looked after by small magical families that owed the Potters their fealty while the holiday homes were under stasis charms. In the end, after talking to the head of the Potter elves, a dignified and cultured elf by the name of (to Harry's eternal gratitude) Randolph, it was decided that an addition of two of Harry's newly employed elves was more than enough to take care of things.

The Black family elves were worse off. The only elf remaining there was Kreacher, and the thing had gone round the bend. A few sharp orders from Harry had straightened out the sulky elf (though he still gave his new master filthy looks every now and then). So while the elf was still cursing Harry's name and muttering (loudly) to himself incredulously about how Harry was a Black, he was now functioning normally.

The elf had been effectively shut up when Harry had managed to insert his name in the Black Family Tapestry along with his new cousin, Nymphadora Tonks when he had gone to visit Grimmauld Place to do so in accordance to custom along with a surprised and somewhat shocked Andromeda and Nymphadora Tonks (he had sworn them to secrecy after that of course). What had fully convinced the elf (much to its chagrin) was that Harry had also managed to restore Sirius', Alphard's and Andromeda's names back onto the tapestry. Only the head and a true Black could do that.

Harry had enlisted the remaining five elves to cleaning Grimmauld Place, Black Castle and the Manor in Fairy's Glen with them also reporting to Randolph who was the senior most (not to mention the most sane) house-elf. The house-elves really had their work cut out for them and couldn't be happier.

All in all, Harry was really looking forward to going back to his room and then heading out for the day. He had finally gotten tired of hanging around Little Whinging quite some time back and didn't want to risk Diagon Alley again. So, he had taken to going out to different cities.

So far he had been to Leeds in Yorkshire, where he had enjoyed the nightlife there, using his Legilimency based abilities to get inside the

myriad of nightclubs in the city. He really was looking forward to going back there to meet this twenty one year old girl he had met in this club called The Subculture and had subsequently gone club hopping with. He had somehow managed to convince her that he was a twenty something year old hotshot executive in a large company. If he played his cards right, she definitely would be his first one! After that, he might think of going to London, Edinburgh or Newcastle.

So it really did kill his mood when he saw the letter addressed to him in Dumbledore's handwriting stating that the old man would be coming over to pick him up in five days.

And here's chapter nine!

My usual thanks to the people who like the story ... and a special one to my friends for helping me out (you know who you are!)

Oh, random fact (if you are interested); The Subculture is an actual place in Leeds. Highly recommended for metal enthusiasts.

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore had been having a very eventful month so far. The very day after Voldemort's continued existence and non-dead status had been revealed to the general public in such a spectacular fashion, he had seen a return of Fudge's personal owl that had been bought by the Minister specifically for letters to Albus a week after Fudge had gotten the position.

While he was happy to see that Fudge hadn't killed or sold the owl to spite him (he was rather fond of it and had even given it the nickname "Bumble"), he wasn't as happy with the letters that came with the owl. After spending one gruelling day at the Ministry questioning the captured Death Eaters, he had managed to stave off further inquests and summons from the Minister using his Headmaster's duties as an excuse. All he had to do was mention the havoc wreaked by Dolores Umbridge, and Fudge was more than willing to shut his mouth.

That didn't stop Fudge from contacting Dumbledore at the earliest possible time however. For the steam from the departing Hogwarts express had barely dissipated from Hogsmeade station when he spotted Bumble winging his way towards him. Were he a lesser man, or in the privacy of his office, Albus would have actually sighed in resignation and a bit of annoyance. It was almost as if the bumbling fool had instructed the owl to wait till that moment to send a letter to him. Nevertheless, Albus had managed to hide his reaction upon spotting the owl. Though he was sure that Minerva and Severus weren't fooled, if the small smirk on Severus' face and the barely concealed humour on Minerva's was any indication.

That letter had been the start of many other letters from Fudge asking Albus for advice. Advice about how to deal with the public, the press, the Wizengamot, the employees at the ministry, furious parents who had started sending howlers complaining about Umbridge and the abuse their charges had suffered under her reign as "Headmistress" and last and most importantly (to Fudge at least), how to keep his post as Minister.

By the end of the first week into the summer, Albus had started developing an eye twitch at the very mention of Cornelius Fudge and found himself trying to control the urge to hex the stupid Minister's stupid owl.

Could that man ever function without explicit instructions? Albus snorted to himself at that thought. From what he could remember of Cornelius during his time at Hogwarts, the boy was regularly seen sending out missives almost every day. He probably needed instructions on going to the loo as well! He shook his head in disappointment, Hiram Fudge was a really brilliant wizard, and he would be turning in his grave now looking at his son and how far the Fudge name has fallen.

He had nearly followed through on his urges of hexing the owl when he got a letter from Fudge detailing his latest brilliant idea to use Harry Potter to help keep his position as Minister and requesting an audience with the boy.

Of course, the first time Albus had read that letter, he had nearly burst out laughing. Fudge, it seemed, had either hired a new secretary who really wasn't well versed in the English Language, or the Minister was getting desperate; after all, the flattery was extremely blatant even by Fudge's standards!

What was even more amusing was that the Minister actually had the hope that Harry would cooperate with him! Albus knew enough about teenagers (considering that he had been dealing with them for more years than he would care to count) to know that the boy would definitely be holding a major grudge against the Minister, and no amount of bribery or flattery would ever be able to sway him.

For one whole minute, a rather vindictive part of Albus actually wanted to grant the Minister his wish. The resulting meeting would certainly be entertaining to watch. In his estimation, it would certainly be on par with that Muggle play he had seen a long time back for his Muggle Studies project. Albus didn't remember the details, but it did involve a lot of magical animals.

Of course, his mood soured rather quickly when he remembered the events that had led to the grand unveiling of the truth, more specifically the death of Sirius Black.

Sirius was not only a valuable fighter, but also rather dear to Albus. While he had many favourites over his long career as an educator (not that he would admit to having any favourites at all), Sirius was one of the two Albus held dear (Harry being the other one). Despite his arrogance, recklessness and occasional cruelty, Sirius had

turned out to have a good head on his shoulders. It was even more astounding considering the reputation the Blacks had for being a Dark Family.

Albus was sincerely glad when he had found out that Sirius was innocent all along. He was also saddened that he never had the chance to make up with the younger man for not believing him or holding a trial for him. He knew that Sirius still had a grudge against him and hadn't yet forgiven him for that. The least he could do now was clear Sirius' name so that his memory could be honoured.

That feat had been ridiculously easy to manage. When questioning the Death Eaters captured in the Ministry, Fudge had tried to ascertain that he had actually seen Voldemort and not someone impersonating the evil man. So he had asked each and every one of the eleven Death Eaters under Veritaserum if it was actually Voldemort and not, say, Sirius Black dressed as Voldemort. That question had not only confirmed Sirius' innocence and Pettigrew's continued existence, but had actually managed to inflict a tone of incredulity and hilarity into voices of the drugged Death Eaters.

In fact, Albus had it on good authority that the Unspeakables who were present at the interrogation had actually started to research that in collaboration with some Potions Masters. Of course, Fudge had kept the whole thing quiet; the public had no clue about Sirius' innocence.

Sirius' death had naturally turned Albus' thoughts towards Harry Potter. And nowadays, thoughts of the boy almost always would depress him. He had made so many mistakes in regards to the boy.

The first and the biggest mistake had been putting him with those reprehensible sorry excuses for human beings. Albus never would've suspected that Petunia could be so vindictive, hateful and petty that she would treat an innocent child like that.

Normally he would have removed Harry immediately and raised him himself if he couldn't find anybody else suitable. Unfortunately, that wasn't possible. For better or worse, Harry was safest there. So far, there had been three failed attempts at kidnapping the boy by fanatic Death Eaters who had managed to escape justice. The blood wards there had ensured their capture as well.

While he knew that Harry would now be able to take care of himself and could be hidden in an appropriately warded and guarded house like any one of the Potter properties he knew existed and heard a lot about, he still felt the need to send Harry to the Dursleys for the summer. Not for Harry's protection, but for theirs. The Dursleys might be reprehensible, and they might be the type of Muggles the Death Eaters would use as an example to justify their actions, but they were human beings nonetheless. Albus couldn't in good conscience allow them to fall at the hands of the Death Eaters when he could prevent it. Of course, he couldn't tell Harry that, for he was sure that the boy would resent him for that and do something foolish like run away. He hoped that the threats some of the Order members had given as he had instructed would make Harry's stay there easier.

But, at the same time, nobody should have been put through that and Albus never felt more ashamed of himself for knowingly putting a child in that situation. At least with Tom he truly hadn't known that the child had been bullied in the orphanage before gaining enough control of his magic to stave off the bullies in his orphanage. Nor did he know that Tom still had occasional problems with some of the older kids till the end of his fourth year.

In an effort to make up for all of that, and to ensure that Harry Potter didn't turn out to be another more powerful version of Tom Riddle (and Albus knew that the boy had far more magical potential than Voldemort) the aged headmaster had tried to give Harry as much love as possible. To that end, he had allowed so much leeway as far as the boy was concerned, even going so far as to bend the rules regarding First Years and brooms.

It was also the reason why he had sent Hagrid to collect the boy. The kindly half-giant would've definitely gone all the way to show Harry some amount of love and be the child's friend.

Albus had also gone ahead and helped introduce Harry to the Weasleys. He knew that Molly Weasley would ensure that Harry would get all of the love and attention that had been denied him those first ten dark years at his aunt's place as well as take care of Hagrid's unintended oversight in not telling the boy about the entrance to the platform.

While the idea of putting Harry up with the Weasleys was a good one, it came with its own flaws. Ron Weasley was by far the most uninspired and lazy boy Albus had the misfortune to meet. His laziness was actually contagious to the point that even he felt apathetic and lazy just by looking at the boy! And Harry being so vulnerable and unused to having or making friends had followed the youngest Weasley boy's footsteps in a way to appease him.

The addition of Hermione Granger to Harry's life had made things even worse. The girl was too bossy, competitive and secure in the superiority of her knowledge and opinions for her own good. In fact, she was the type of Muggleborn the Dark Families used as justification for their beliefs. The only people who could tolerate her were Harry and Ron (as he had to call him, since "Mr. Weasley" applied to seven of the Weasley children), and the latter only did so because of the former. Albus was also pretty sure that even the other Muggleborns in the school hated her. All in all, with her current attitude, he did not see her ever realising her dream of becoming Head Girl.

Why Harry couldn't become friends with someone sensible like Neville Longbottom was beyond him. The boy certainly had better table manners than Ron Weasley. Albus shuddered at that; he really admired the fortitude of the rest of Gryffindor house. Because nothing was more nauseating than sitting next to a person masticate while they talked to you, or being in the general vicinity of a person who insisted in masticating with their mouths open. The sounds you could hear from an openly chewing mouth ... he nearly lost his dinner thinking about it. Molly really should work on the boy's manners.

Hopefully, mentioning the prophecy and the similarity he had with young Mr. Longbottom would be enough of a catalyst in ensuring that Harry befriended the boy.

Looking back on it, he should have told the boy the first time about the prophecy or done something to inspire the lad to learn or train by himself. While Albus wouldn't have minded training him, he really wasn't a miracle worker.

How could he hope to bring an Eleven year old kid to the level of a Dark Lord who is more than Seventy years old? Especially when the same child wasn't willing to apply himself to his maximum potential?

The only thing he could hope to do was find a way to exploit the "power he knows not" as the prophecy stated. And the only thing that fit the criteria in relation to Voldemort was Harry's capacity to love.

How can you possibly train that?

Even making Ronald Weasley a prefect had failed in instilling any responsibility on the redheaded boy (a fact that Minerva had pointed out time and time again) Ron had also completely failed in looking out for Harry in school.

Albus hoped that inducting both him and Miss Granger as junior members of the Order this summer would somehow awaken a sense of duty and responsibility in both of them. He also hoped that Ms. Granger would finally get a hint and help Ron in that endeavour or at least take up the initiative herself. Then again, it seemed that the girl needed instructions in a text book on how to breathe, so he didn't have his hopes up. It seemed that Albus would need to actually tell her. At least the girl was smart enough that he wouldn't have to resort to being completely direct. Ah, kids these days, why couldn't they understand subtle prodding?

As an added incentive, he had started paying them from his own vault (secretly of course, wouldn't want the other members of the Order to start getting resentful about that) to ensure their services. It wasn't as if he would need the money anymore.

Molly, especially, would have to be kept in the dark; he didn't want her to know that he was supplying her son with more money. If she ever found out, he was sure that the woman's voice would reach such a high pitch and frequency that it would be capable of driving banshees away and rendering him deaf. She already had a hard time accepting the small sum Albus had set aside for her thanks to that damnable Prewitt pride of hers and he knew that it was only because of who and what he was to her that she had accepted the money. The points he had raised had also done a lot towards convincing her.

Albus really hated to see such a good family be so encumbered by something as petty and transient as a lack of adequate wealth. Besides, the Prewitts had given a lot of themselves in the last war,

loosing much of their moderate wealth and properties (not to mention their male heirs, all but making the Prewitt line extinct) that the last of the Prewitts deserved some compensation. And taking care of seven children with an additional eighth later on did require funds. Especially when they had the task of showing the aforementioned eighth child some much needed fun in life; those Quidditch tickets weren't exactly free after all. He wondered how they managed to explain that away to Harry...

Albus raised his right hand and idly examined the cursed appendage. It really saddened him to know that Tom had gone to such depravity in order to ensure his immortality. As his eyes settled upon the stone set into the ugly ring on his finger, Albus cursed himself for his stupidity. He should've known that there was going to be a curse placed on that ring, but finally chancing upon the one Hallow he had been looking for all his life had eroded all of his good sense.

He should have died the moment he put that ring on. It was only through sheer willpower and the Elder Wand that Albus had managed to survive long enough to avail Severus' help. That would ensure that he lived long enough to see the end of the next school year. Though he wasn't too hopeful; from what Severus had told him, Tom had given Draco the task of assassinating him in an effort to punish Lucius Malfoy. It would seem that he would have to sacrifice his life by the end of this academic year to ensure the young man's wellbeing. Thankfully the boy hadn't been marked yet. Though he feared what would happen should Mr. Malfoy finally succeed.

Worse still was that Narcissa had somehow managed to get Severus to swear an Unbreakable Vow to help the boy complete the task Voldemort had set for him. Oh well, better to die on your own two feet by an Avada Kedavra than by spending the last few days of your life in the Hospital Wing fighting an incurable curse that might make Voldemort suspicious about the state of his Horcruxes. At least this way, he had the opportunity of saving two young lives. That oath gave him the added benefit of being able to bully Severus into giving him an honourable death. Why Severus was being such a girl over it was beyond him. He was dying anyway!

And speaking of which, there really hadn't been much in the way of attacks. From what Severus had told him, Voldemort's failed attempt at possession had severely weakened the Dark Lord. The only people who were permitted to see him were Severus, Bellatrix and

Peter. As far as the average Death Eater was concerned, Tom was planning something big and was waiting for the best time to strike.

However, that didn't mean he wasn't active; he had, through Bellatrix, orchestrated a rash of Death Eater attacks on Muggles within a week after being exposed. Destroying a lot of property and ending many lives. Unfortunately Tom had not informed Snape of any of the attacks, as he had relied on Bellatrix to announce and occasionally take part in the attacks so Albus was caught as unawares as the Ministry about any attack. Not that he would be able to use the information, as it would put suspicion on Snape almost immediately. And Muggle lives, no matter how many weren't worth his only spy in Tom's ranks. Sacrifices would have to be made to ensure Tom's downfall. After all, as Gellert used to say, 'Zum Größeren Nutzen.'

At least the Order was able to thwart one of Tom's plans without risking Severus. It was indeed fortunate that young Miss Bones and her friend had managed to overhear that conversation between two Death Eaters without being caught and had told Nymphadora immediately. Amelia Bones as Minister would make it much harder for Tom to undermine the Ministry. She, unlike Scrimgeour, had a good head on her shoulders and would think before acting. Also, not much would get past her so infiltrating the Ministry wouldn't be that easy. She had also managed to appease the Muggle Prime Minister for the moment. Though he was still wary about her intentions in meeting Harry; what could she possibly want with the boy?

Another thing that had gone wrong for Tom had been Ollivander. None of the Death Eaters had been able to get past the old wand maker's wards. To say that Tom had been angry at both the failures would be an understatement. And the fact that Ollivander was still open and the only people that couldn't get in were his Death Eaters, assassins or mercenaries while any other wizard, witch or child could hadn't really helped improve the Dark Lord's temper that much either. He had immediately killed the poor recruit that had informed him of that.

Eventually Tom had been forced to give up on getting the wand maker when he found out that Ollivander's wards were capable of removing even the strongest of Imperius curses. Though Albus did not get his hopes up too high; Tom had always been persistent when it came to things he wanted

Unfortunately not all of Tom's endeavours had been a complete failure. He still managed to inspire terror in the wizarding community by carrying out a successful raid on Florean Fortescue's shop. There was no trace of Florean and Dumbledore hoped that his former classmate was still alive. Florean's family was still alive and had subsequently fled the country for the moment.

Another tragedy was the assassination of Emmiline Vance. She was a very talented witch, and an important member of the Order. Her loss would be deeply felt.

Albus pulled out his watch and noted the time. He would have to leave now if he wanted to be on time to pick Harry up. They would be taking a stop at his old colleague's current location. He hoped to convince Horace to return to teaching.

Like Albus, Horace knew a lot about the Dark Arts, and Tom had been unusually close to the man during his time at Hogwarts. So he would know or at least have a clue as to how many Horcruxes Tom had planned to make or had already made.

Harry was the one card he could use to guarantee Horace's return. The man wouldn't be able to resist being close to, and mentoring the Boy-Who-Lived. While Albus abhorred using others for his own means, he had no choice in the matter. He had to get Horace close to him so he could confirm his suspicions about Tom's Horcruxes. That memory he had been given last year when he was "on the run" from the Ministry as it were (as if they could catch him) was an obvious fake now that he had gotten the time to view it.

The man had immediately disappeared as Dumbledore expected and it was only now that Albus had managed to track him down.

As Albus reached the front gates, he cast a powerful disillusionment charm, actually rendering him invisible. Turning on his heel he disappeared with a whisper.

Reappearing at Privet Drive, he took a moment to survey the street and neatly organised houses slightly uncomfortably before taking his Deluminator out. This was one of his inventions; something he and Aberforth had come up with when they were young and innocent. He still kept it to remind himself of the times when he and Aberforth

used to get along and do things together like real brothers. Before things had gone so wrong...

Shaking his head, he clicked the Deluminator, slowly and steadily putting off every light in the street. Once the street was dark, he removed the charm he had placed on himself. While the Wand helped in magnifying his already impressive powers, he still needed to conserve his magical energy. Especially because of the curse placed on him.

Stepping up to Number Four, he rang the doorbell, secretly delighted at using such a quaint muggle invention. Wizards technically didn't need to knock as the wards were enough to alert the owners of a house of the arrival of a visitor. Of course, one always knocked; it was the polite thing to do. And in these times, it didn't hurt to be too cautious.

The door opened to reveal the person he had come to collect. Though as he stepped into the hallway, he noticed a lot of changes had been wrought on the boy. Gone was the small and slightly undernourished teenager dressed in over-large clothes; in its place was a tall slim and athletic looking young lad tastefully dressed in clothes that fit him. His eyes, no longer behind those thick glasses were a faint luminescent green showcasing the awesome magical power he held at his fingertips. He also noted that the boy had grown quite a bit over the summer and was now almost as tall as he was.

Albus took a moment to study his face; what little youthful roundness that was there had vanished leaving a haughty and aristocratic face with heavy eyelids and a straight nose. His medium length black hair previously untameable was now falling elegantly over his eyes even though it was still a bit messy. Dumbledore knew that Harry would be attracting a lot of attention with his new looks. He also no longer looked like a carbon copy of James Potter, although some features of his face reminded Albus of somebody (he couldn't say who exactly). As Harry shifted, those thoughts left him as he noted the diamond stud glittering on Harry's left earlobe in surprise.

'Good evening Harry, I hope I find you in good health?' Casting his eyes around the house, he said, 'might I inquire about the whereabouts of your relatives?'

'Good evening sir, it's good to see you too,' said Harry, his voice now a smooth baritone, 'They left the house this morning to Aunt Marge's house and won't be back till the next week.'

'Ah, I see. Did this have anything to do with the news about my impending arrival?'

'Well, they did seem eager on leaving when I told them about you visiting shortly sir,' said Harry with a hint of dark humour in his voice.

'Alas, I was hoping they were around. I wanted to have a few words with them,' said Dumbledore absently.

Harry didn't mention that he had managed to knock all three of his relatives out with a lovely spell he had found in Curses and Counter Curses. It simulated being hit over the head with a pan and was far more powerful than the version Malfoy had used on him in Second Year. Needless to say, the each of the Dursleys will be waking up with a killer headache the next morning. Especially Aunt Petunia (he had taken special care to ensure that she had a more than adequate experience of that sensation, using repetition as his main technique).

Harry excused himself for a moment to get his things. He had already gotten his trunk packed this morning and gotten Dobby to restore the room back to its original condition. Harry had recently gained a new appreciation for the little elf. He had managed to heal the piercing Harry had gotten in his ear a few days back in a matter of minutes. Of course, by that time, Harry swore never to listen to pretty girls again. He still wasn't sure that the stud made him look "sexy". Personally he felt like a chav. The end result had certainly been worth it; he had lost his virginity to her after all. Besides, Bill had an earring too, so it couldn't be all that bad. At least he had been able to get a proper diamond and white-gold stud. It really did sparkle nicely...

Harry picked up his new multi-compartment trunk (another impulse buy) with its inbuilt feather-light charm as well as Hedwig's empty cage. The owl couldn't have flown out of there faster upon hearing that she may be transported via portkey.

Getting down, Harry could just hear Dumbledore putting on the finishing touches on a howler he had made for the Dursleys detailing

the number of ways they had failed their nephew and what terrible parents they were.

Harry rolled his eyes. The man really needed to work on his timing. He was fifteen years eight months one week and an hour too late as far as Harry was concerned (not that he was counting). And it wasn't as if the Dursleys cared about what Dumbledore had to say. Though, Harry smirked, they would certainly care about the little going away presents he had set for them!

His howler finished, Dumbledore placed it on the dining table and turned towards Harry. 'There is one other matter I want to discuss with you. I think you might want to sit down for this' he said in a kind voice leading Harry to the living room and ushering him onto the sofa there. Sitting down on Vernon's favourite chair and facing Harry, he continued, 'It involves Sirius' will. Now that part is simple enough as he has left everything to you. Meaning that a sizeable chunk of gold has been added to your vault along with the house in Grimmauld Place,' he paused for a while wholly misinterpreting Harry's reaction to that statement.

'The problem is that the Blacks had in all probability put in place protections to ensure that only the next male Black may inherit anything, including the ancestral house. This is why we have temporarily vacated Grimmauld Place to ensure that Narcissa or Bellatrix cannot come in to claim it as Draco would be the next male with Black blood in him as we were not sure if Sirius' request could be fully carried out. Thus, I have thought up a test to see if you have truly inherited the house.'

Harry barely managed to suppress a triumphant smirk. It seemed that he had managed to one up Dumbledore. Though the lying old twat hadn't once seen fit to inform him about the full extent of his wealth even though now was the perfect opportunity.

'Now I don't want you to worry about the test, it's nothing too onerous,' said Dumbledore again misinterpreting the cause of Harry's grimace. He clicked his fingers and called for Kreacher.

At once the sullen and ancient house-elf appeared in front of Harry. Kreacher hadn't taken kindly to being assisted by other house-elves and it was only after some extensive orders given by Harry that he had kept his cursing and muttering down to a minimum. Otherwise,

Harry was sure that the elf would have been throwing a major, violent and deafeningly loud tantrum at the moment. Quickly getting the hint, Harry ordered the elf to shut his mouth with as much venom as possible. He had to keep up appearances after all. Not that it was hard; he did hate the little shit after all.

'Well, now that's settled,' said Dumbledore clapping his hands, 'what do you plan to do with it all?'

Wow, he's actually letting me make my own decisions, thought Harry sarcastically. Schooling his features, he said in a perfectly innocent voice, 'I suppose that the Order could continue using it for the moment. Unless of course you have found a better place...'

'Oh no Harry, Grimmauld Place will be more than adequate,' said Dumbledore looking slightly relieved, I bet he was planning on coercing me otherwise thought Harry darkly.

Turning to Kreacher, Harry said sternly, 'Go back to Grimmauld Place. Watch over the house and see that it's clean. Am I clear?' Seeing the elf nod, Harry smiled, 'Good, dismissed.'

'Was that necessary?' Asked Dumbledore after Kreacher disappeared. He had a sombre expression on his face.

Harry just shrugged. He was unwilling to let his true feelings known. He also found that he was beginning to care less about the headmaster's opinions.

Dumbledore took a moment to look at Harry for a while before getting up, followed by the younger wizard. 'Where are we going and how will we be getting there sir?'

'I will be dropping you off at the Burrow as you know, but first, I wish to make a stop at a house of my former colleague's. I hope to convince him out of retirement to teach for this year at least. As you know, we are one staff member short,' said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling, 'In fact, I think you will be able to properly convince him Harry.'

It didn't take long for Harry to figure out what Dumbledore meant by that statement. It seemed that the person they were going to be visiting was either a fan or a simpering buffoon and Dumbledore

wanted to use Harry's status as Boy-Who-Lived (or "the chosen one," as he was known as these days) to get the person to teach. Harry sighed mentally; it looked like he would be having another year of a crappy incompetent Defence teacher. This time, he didn't know if he was in the mood to help train his school mates. He certainly doubted he had the time to teach them anything, considering all the training he planned to be doing in secret.

Dumbledore strode out into the hallway and stood near Harry's trunk. He examined it for a minute and after getting Harry to remove his Invisibility cloak, waved his wand at the trunk and cage making both of them disappear.

'Your possessions are now at the Burrow,' he explained looking at Harry's raised eyebrow.

At least you asked Harry thought sarcastically. He just smiled at Dumbledore in response, making sure to reinforce his Occlumency shields.

'Shall we? We do have a lot to do tonight,' said Dumbledore, seeing Harry agree, he opened the door and ushered the teen outside.

The walk down the street was filled with an uncomfortable silence. Harry did not know what to feel. While he still resented Dumbledore for his meddling, his interactions with the headmaster in the past few years he had been at Hogwarts had instilled a sense of awe in him some of which was still there even though last year had brought with it the realisation that his idol had feet of clay. Harry still couldn't decide if the man truly cared for him or saw him as a weapon or if his placement at the Dursleys was for his protection and not for another more sinister reason.

There was also the fact that he never had a conversation with the headmaster outside Hogwarts before. A desk had always been there between them as well as some formality.

Dumbledore, however, seemed completely relaxed.

'Keep your wand at the ready, Harry,' he said brightly.

'But I thought I wasn't supposed to use magic outside the school, sir?' Harry said putting on a confused look. He did not want to let on

that he had been doing magic the past few weeks. Or that he had been using it to get his vengeance on the Dursleys. After all, he was walking next to the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot.

'If we are ever attacked tonight, I give you full permission to use any counter-jinx or –curse that comes to your mind.' Said Dumbledore, 'However, you will not need to fear an attack at this time.'

'Er, why not, sir?'

'Because you are with me,' Dumbledore said simply, arrogant sod. 'This will do, Harry,'

The duo stopped at the end of Privet Drive. Dumbledore then took out a lighter and with a click, sent balls of light zooming back to the streetlamps, bathing Privet Drive with a sudden orange glare much to Harry's amazement.

Putting the lighter out of the way, Dumbledore turned to Harry and holding out his arm, said, 'I presume that you haven't passed your Apparition test?'

Harry nodded affirmatively, not bothering to mention that while he hadn't been tested, he could still Apparate flawlessly, 'If you would grab hold of my arm Harry, I will take us to our new destination. If you don't mind, I would prefer that it be the left arm as my wand arm is rather fragile at the moment.'

Harry just then noticed the rather dead looking hand in surprise and wondered why he hadn't noticed it before.

'Sir- what happened to your-'

'I got complacent. I regret that I cannot tell you the full story at the moment as we do not have enough time. The story is rather exciting, and I promise to tell it to you later on when I can do it full justice. Now if you please?'

Grabbing the proffered arm, Harry was side-Apparated away for the first time. He immediately felt the difference between side-Apparition and doing it on your own. The squeezing sensation was slightly more pronounced causing him a bit of discomfort.

He opened his eyes to find himself in an empty village square, in the centre of which was an old war memorial and a few benches. He spied a nearby sign that indicated that he was in the village of Budleigh Babberton.

'Are you all right?' asked Dumbledore, looking at Harry in the eye, 'The sensation does take some getting used to.' The lad seemed to be surprisingly composed considering that it was his first time. Not for the first time that night he registered that Harry was as tall as he was, and may later outstrip Dumbledore himself in height.

Harry just shrugged, 'It definitely is better than the Floo or Portkey,' he said, 'I cannot wait to learn it myself!' He hoped this covered any suspicions the headmaster may have had at Harry being used Apparition.

Dumbledore smiled, drew his travelling cloak a bit tighter around his neck and said, 'This way.'

He set off at a brisk pace past an empty inn and a few houses. According to a clock on a nearby church, it was nearly midnight.

'So tell me Harry,' said Dumbledore. 'Has your scar been hurting at all?'

'No,' said Harry fingering his scar and if I am right, it won't be happening ever again, he added silently. He glanced back at Dumbledore to see the old wizard was wearing a satisfied expression.

'I thought not,' he said absently. 'Lord Voldemort has finally realised the dangerous access you have been enjoying to his thoughts. His attempt at possessing you has also weakened him significantly, so I imagine that he is employing Occlumency against you.'

Harry just nodded in reply not bothering to tell the old man his suspicions.

They proceeded up a steep narrow street lined with houses. The odd chill that had recently settled over Privet Drive persisted here too reminding Harry of Dementors. His wand hand twitched, as he cast a look over his shoulder, ready at a moment's notice to summon his wand into his hand, half expecting them to pop up at

any moment. According to the Prophet, they had recently joined Voldemort's ranks and were now running amok, breeding (Harry did not want to think about how).

'Professor, I saw in the Daily Prophet that Fudge has been sacked ...'

'Correct,' said Dumbledore, 'He has been replaced by Amelia Bones, the former head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.'

'Is she any good?'

'She is able, most certainly. I doubt that she would underestimate Lord Voldemort. She also is a natural leader and was quite a force in the First Wizarding War.'

'I also read about her attack as well ...'

'Ah yes,' said Dumbledore quietly. 'It was indeed fortunate that her niece overheard that conversation. Otherwise things might have ended differently.'

So Susan kept her promise after all, I hope she is alright ... thought Harry.

They finally came to a sudden stop at the small neat stone house they were approaching. Harry had just noticed the front door hanging off its hinges.

'Wand out and follow me Harry,' said Dumbledore quietly as he moved silently up the garden path.

Harry followed the Headmaster, jerking his wand arm downward and flicking his wrist at the end to bring his wand out of its holster and into his hand. He used the techniques he had learnt from years of sneaking around at Number Four to walk as fast as possible while still staying silent, keeping his knees slightly bent and looking around for possible threats.

In the end, he need not have worried. It seemed that Horace Slughorn (for that was Dumbledore's colleague's name) had been faking the whole thing after all. Harry was a bit irritated at himself

that he hadn't noticed the lack of a Dark Mark, but that could not be helped. The man had done a good job in such a short time anyway.

Though curiously, he could somehow sense that the overstuffed armchair lying on its side was actually a wizard pretending and not the real thing.

Slughorn's tactics of hiding in Muggle neighbourhoods in empty houses along with his ingenious (if hasty) illusion that he had thrown up gave Harry the impression of a consummate Slytherin. The hungry look he had given Harry along with his showing off of the many movers and shakers of the wizarding world that he had met and influenced only served to reinforce that image.

Harry played his part perfectly. As soon as Dumbledore excused himself to the loo, he started buttering the man up and extolling the virtues of being at Hogwarts. He played at every weakness he knew the short rotund old man possessed to convince him. He felt a bit dirty doing that and slightly resentful of Dumbledore for using him in such a fashion. But right now he could care less. It was getting late and he wanted to sleep. Besides, if half of Slughorn's stories were true, he would be useful to Harry in the future.

One thing Harry could not help but shake off was the feeling that he knew the man from somewhere. Which was odd seeing as he would have remembered meeting the man before; he did have some distinguishing features after all.

When Dumbledore took that moment to make his entrance, Harry knew that he had succeeded, (if the slight twinkle in his eye was any indication). Harry had the feeling that the crafty old man had been lurking just outside the room listening in and not in the bathroom looking at knitting patterns as he claimed. Harry idly figured that Dumbledore would have been a good Slytherin too. What with the way he had positioned Harry and masterfully taken control of the situation. Because by the time they had left, Slughorn had practically begged for the position (at least as much begging a Slytherin would do).

As Harry grasped Dumbledore's arm again in preparation to being Apparated to the Burrow, he reflected on the strange flashback he had when seeing that ring on Dumbledore's finger when he had briefly displayed it in front of Slughorn.

He was standing over a middle-aged man, looking at the handsome features (so much like his own) contorted in shock, pain and fear. Right behind his victim lay a much older couple, clearly dead. He took a minute to savour the moment before a flash of green light later, the man was just as dead as the elderly couple. This was followed by an intense pain in his chest.

Harry had barely managed to conceal his reactions on seeing the ring. Again, like the cup, he could not tell what that vision meant. Also, this time the pain (while still imaginary) was a bit more pronounced. It had taken all of his willpower not to let a sound escape his lips.

Harry barely paid attention to Dumbledore's heavily veiled attempt at scaring him away from Slughorn. While he didn't really like the man, he did find him likeable enough. For one, his very own mother was a favourite of the professor's. Another plus point was that they both shared a hatred of Umbridge. Slughorn had actually gone on to say that the Centaurs deserved a medal for their assistance in rendering her insane.

So engrossed was he in his thoughts that he almost did not notice that he had been Apparated again to Ottery St. Catchpole. Quickly gathering his wits about him, he followed Dumbledore and let himself be ushered into Mr. Weasley's shed where the interrogation began.

While he was expecting to be grilled about things, it nevertheless irritated him. What business was it of Dumbledore's where he had gotten his new clothes and what he had done to his eyes? What right did he have to ask him about the trunk either?

Harry answered the questions by lying through his teeth. He explained the clothes away as the rewards of a summer job he had gotten in the local bookstore, and the eyes to a Muggle surgery. The trunk's existence was attributed to an owl order form. Harry was a bit surprised that Dumbledore hadn't been asked about his piercing.

Harry made sure to keep his Occlumency shields up and was glad he had done so when he felt the old man trying to invade his thoughts, angering him.

Dumbledore had the good sense to withdraw almost immediately. He figured that Harry had managed to learn some Occlumency after all. It pleased him to know that placing the lad with Severus hadn't been such a bad idea after all. After satiating his curiosity about Harry's mental health and talking to him about some private lessons, he walked the boy to Molly's doorstep.

It seemed to Albus that Harry was finally ready to face his destiny and become a leader, if the way he stood up to him was any indication. Now all that was left to do was to guide and prepare him. It was about time really, he should have told the boy the prophecy five years ago...

Oh well, there was no use crying over spilled potion. After all, things were going as planned.

If you have seen Underworld: Rise of the Lycans, imagine Viktor's glow-in-the-dark blue eyes being green and put them on Harry's face.

For those of you wondering how Harry manages to draw his wand, think Assassin's Creed ... it's the same way Altair and Ezio draw their hidden blades. Only here, Harry has to catch the wand in his hand.

Now a few questions;

1. How many of you guys thought that this was going to be a typical Dumbledore/Weasley/Granger bashing fic before reading this chapter?

2. What do you think now you have read this chapter? Is it still Dumbledore/Weasley/Granger bashing?

and on a completely unrelated note;

3. What is the most annoying song you have ever heard that sticks in your head and plays in your head over and over again in an endless loop the minute you see or hear something even distantly related to the song? And is it in any way more annoying than the one played in Barney the Dinosaur?

Well, review!

Walking towards the Burrow, Dumbledore knocked on the back door with Harry just behind him. Harry could hear a pause on the other side before a voice he knew to be Molly Weasley's asked hesitantly and nervously, 'who's there? Declare yourselves!'

'It is I, Albus Dumbledore, bringing Harry.'

The door immediately opened to show a slightly tired looking Molly Weasley wearing a house coat and a relieved expression on her face.

'Albus, come on in quickly!' As Harry and Dumbledore stepped into the house, Mrs. Weasley noticed Harry.

'Harry! How are you dear?' she hugged him tightly before stepping back to get a good look at him. 'Look at how much you've grown! You are just as bad as Ron. We'll probably have to resize all the doors just so you boys can fit inside,' she looked up to his face with a fond expression.

'I'm fine Mrs. Weasley,' said Harry. Looking into the kitchen, he noticed Tonks sitting at the table, 'Wotcher Tonks.'

'Harry!' The metamorphmagus smiled brilliantly.

'Well, I shall be on my way. I do have important matters to discuss with Amelia after all,' said Dumbledore. He doffed his hat to Mrs. Weasley, and with a 'Goodbye Nymphadora,' to a scowling Tonks, made his way to the edge of the property where he Apparated out.

'I should get going as well Molly,' said Tonks. As she passed by Harry, she whispered a quiet 'Thank you' before walking out of the house. Harry just smiled at her, knowing what she was talking about. The last time they had met, was when he was putting her name into the Black Family Tapestry in Grimmauld Place, she had been rather woebegone. It hadn't taken long to find out what the problem was; Nymphadora Tonks, it seemed, had the biggest crush on one Remus John Lupin. Remus, on the other hand, wasn't returning her affections.

Though Harry knew otherwise; he had corresponded with his father's old friend and had managed to find out that he really did have affections for the much younger witch, but was unwilling to

pursue a relationship since he felt it was too dangerous for her to be associated with a known werewolf.

So Harry decided to play matchmaker and told Tonks about it. He also made it a point of mentioning why Remus would want to push any person interested in him in that way away. It seemed that his information had worked, for Tonks no longer looked like somebody had killed her puppy (or in this case wolf cub). Harry had received a letter the very next day from Remus informing him of his new girlfriend. Of course, most of the letter did have quite a rant about how much of a meddlesome little bugger he found Harry, but that wasn't so important. Remus did seem thankful enough. Harry then had a much longer letter from Tonks giving a blow-by-blow account of her talk with Remus.

While Harry didn't fully understand how and why Remus and Tonks had gotten together, or why Tonks was attracted to him, he was still happy for them. They certainly were happy with each other, if the complete change in Tonks was any indication.

'So, Hermione's here?' he asked as he tickled Crookshanks behind the ear after he had jumped on to and settled at his knees.

'Oh yes, she arrived the day before yesterday.'

Harry didn't make much conversation after that, content in just concentrating on finishing his soup. He let Mrs. Weasley do most of the talking, occasionally inserting in a word or two when required.

Twenty minutes later, sleepy and full of soup, Harry slipped into one of the beds in Fred and George's room, falling asleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow. Glad to be back at The Burrow and among his kind at last.

A few hours later, he awoke fully rested. Glancing at his watch of the day, he noticed that it was pretty early in the morning. Harry quickly got into a pair of running trousers and a t-shirt for his morning jog. Stepping outside into the crisp morning, he started running. The route he had planned would take him around the perimeter of the large garden to the orchard. Entering the orchard, he planned on running its perimeter before getting back to the gate, where, if he could manage it, he would jog along the second half of the back garden ending up back at the house.

As with all plans, this one fell apart almost immediately. Harry had just started running when he heard a cackle. Looking back he noticed that he had drawn the attention of a few garden gnomes who had taken it upon themselves to start chasing him. Harry increased his speed not wanting to be caught by them. Those nasty blighters had a mean bite.

Suddenly getting an idea, he drew his wand, twisted around and started sending stinging hexes at the gnomes while still running. By the time Harry had reached the paddock, he was pretty winded, feeling as if he had run a marathon. The uneven ground coupled with the strangely agile gnomes did pose quite a challenge, though his accuracy was pretty decent; he had hit around seven of the ten gnomes before they had given up on chasing him.

Harry smiled to himself. I hope they try that again tomorrow, he thought. I can use the practise.

Vaulting over the low fence Harry headed into the orchard where after finding a fairly secluded place far enough from the Burrow, he continued his training. A few days back, he had hit a dead end as far as practising new spells was concerned since most of them were either high level spells with a rather noticeable effect or spells that required a human target or at the least a human-like target. After all, one cannot make a tree feel dizzy, while small animals were rather difficult to experiment on since they weren't human and the effects were different.

Additionally, for some reason they seemed to have an urge to dodge any spell sent their way. You'd think they'd stay in place especially after being conjured or transfigured, but noooo. They would insist on behaving just like the real things! And the little buggers were pretty good at it too. In fact, it was only spending so much time casting hexes, jinxes and curses at rabbits that Harry had managed to get so many gnomes. The rabbits were much faster and more nimble than those ugly things.

Because of that, he was restricted to improving his accuracy and speed of the spells that he had learnt before. He was forced to stop that after one of his conjured rabbits escaped his spot and had run into a Muggle child where it had promptly disappeared in front of the

startled toddler. He didn't want to take further risks, so he had stuck to stationary targets.

Now that he was in a more secluded spot, far away from any Muggle, he could give himself moving targets. Conjuring a rabbit, he started sending stunners at the thing as fast as he could as the rabbit started dodging and twisting around. He noticed that over time as he got more used at casting spells that he did not require that much in the way of wand movements to successfully cast his spells. He had also noticed that the spells were no longer jets of vibrant light. While the light emitted from them was still there, it had lost some of its body and seemed to be slightly clearer.

At first he was worried about what that could mean, but then he remembered that in their duel, Voldemort and Dumbledore had sent spells that were far clearer in colour compared to the Death Eaters and Order members. In fact, one could say that the spells that came out of their wands were more like ripples of faintly coloured light.

Harry came to the conclusion that greater control in magic resulted in lesser amount of magical energy being wasted as light, giving the spell more power. That theory was further confirmed when the conjured rabbit was blasted quite a distance when hit by the stunner before disappearing. Now that he looked back on it, the gnomes he had managed to hit also were blasted back quite a distance before landing. It looked like his meditative exercises in controlling his magic had paid off. Then again, the creatures were rather small...

Harry had also realised that switching wand hands had produced a better result. Using his left hand felt more natural and comfortable than his right hand. The mystery of that was solved by his Occlumency exercises. When he was much younger, his primary school teacher had taken to "correcting" his left-handedness by rapping his knuckles with a scale every time he used his left hand to write or eat. The Dursleys were more than happy to follow through when they heard about it from Dudley. After all, it did make Harry miserable.

So while Harry had gotten used to being right handed, he was never too comfortable with it. Harry had all but forgotten about that time. Now after going through those memories, he had decided to go back to using his left hand. He had taken some frustration of having that done to him out on Dudley by breaking his right arm now and again

rather viciously in his quest of learning how to heal and break bones and intentionally taking time to find a way to heal the break. It was the least that fat lump of lard could do for having snitched on him to his parents. He silently vowed to track down and ensure that his teacher could never use her right arm ever again. It had taken a lot of time practising with his left hand for him to get to the point where his handwriting was no longer illegible. And nothing was more tiresome than having to write lines over and over again in the summer when you aren't required to write any assignments.

Finished for the day, he jogged back to the Burrow. Approaching the back door, he smelt bacon and waffles. Following his nose, he entered the kitchen to find a vision of perfection; a blonde goddess standing at the stove and cooking breakfast.

'Fleur, is that you?'

Fleur Delacour turned around to see a tall handsome and sweaty young man standing at the doorframe. His mop of messy black hair was sticking to his forehead while his vibrant green eyes were looking at her in an expression of surprised happiness.

It took Fleur a few moments to recognise him. "Arry!" she cried, 'Eet 'as been so long!' Striding up to him she reached up to kiss him on both the cheeks.

'My, you 'ave grown!' She said appreciatively looking at him up and down.

'I guess I'm not a "leettle boy" anymore,' Harry replied with amusement looking down at Fleur who was now a few inches shorter than him.

'Non, you definitely are not a "leettle boy" now.' she said slightly flirtatiously.

Harry blushed slightly at her last remark causing Fleur to smirk. Clearing his throat, he sat down at the table.

'It's a pleasant surprise to see you here Fleur. What have you been doing these days?'

'They 'aven't told you?' Fleur asked incredulously. Before Harry could reply however, Mrs. Weasley came into the kitchen.

She started as she saw Harry in the kitchen, evidently not expecting to see him so early in the morning.

'Harry dear, what are you doing up so early? I certainly did not expect you to be up already since you had a rather late night. Are you all right dear? You're all hot and sweaty ... you don't have a fever, do you?' she asked in a motherly manner feeling his forehead with the back of her hand.

'I'm fine Mrs. Weasley,' said Harry shrugging her hand off. 'It's just that I have recently started exercising every morning ever since summer started and now, I am used to waking up early in the morning.'

'Eet is vary good that you 'ave started exercising 'Arry,' Fleur interjected. 'You are looking rather 'andsome. The girls will go wild over you.'

Mrs. Weasley made a disapproving noise at Fleur's remark before turning to Harry. 'Well, it's nice to see that you take your health seriously Harry dear,' she said.

'Thanks Mrs. Weasley.'

Harry turned back to Fleur to ask his original question again. 'By the way, you still didn't tell me how you ended up here of all places.'

Fleur immediately rounded on Mrs. Weasley, 'You did not tell 'im?' Then not giving a shocked and spluttering Mrs. Weasley any chance to defend herself, she turned back on Harry, tossing her head and whipping Mrs. Weasley on the face with her hair in the process.

'William and I are getting married,' she said with a great deal of happiness. 'Of course, you are invited. Gabrielle would love to meet you.'

'Wow, that's great Fleur I am happy for you!' said Harry. He noticed that Mrs. Weasley didn't seem to be too happy about it but didn't say anything. Let them work it out between each other. He had no intention of getting in the middle of a fight between a hot headed

short tempered ginger mother of seven equally hot-headed and short tempered ginger children and a girl who could actually throw fire when angry. Bill sure knew how to pick 'em, thought Harry in amusement. At least Charlie could help Bill should he ever find himself on the wrong end of Fleur's temper. I'm sure Charlie knows a lot about the different burn relieving spells, potions and salves from working with those dragons.

Besides, he had his own problems; he had managed to get to know Daphne (as he had been told to call her by her father) a bit over the past few days, and found her to be quite an interesting person. After the initial nerve wracking meeting with Cyrus Greengrass (Daphne's father) discussing the terms of the contract, Harry had been left alone with Daphne for a while so that they could get to know each other.

After the first few minutes of enduring Daphne's ranting who wasn't well pleased in being given away to Harry on a contract made before she was born, the ice had finally broken when she referred to Harry as the "The Gryffindor Golden Boy". Harry, not having been called that to his face before in his life had broken down laughing and, trying to catch his breath, had asked a not-so-amused Daphne if that was the best she could come up with. Eventually her mask cracked as with a small smirk she did admit that it was a pretty silly thing to call him. Though it wasn't too surprising, that term was coined by Draco Malfoy in second year.

After Harry telling Daphne the intriguing tale of just how it was that the contract applied to him, their brief meeting had basically ended with Daphne telling Harry that while he seemed like a nice person, she still thought he was a reckless idiot with no hint of subtlety. However, she was willing to give him a chance to change that by the end of their seventh year (after which they would be getting married) or else. When he pointed out that there was no way she could get out of marrying him, she just gave him a cold smirk and said, 'that doesn't mean I cannot make the rest of your life a living hell, Potter. So you'd better work on it!'

Harry wasn't too worried about that bit since he was planning to change his general attitude anyway, but that remark nevertheless made him shiver, so he just nodded wordlessly in assent.

Finally, just before her father had come to pick her up, Daphne turned to Harry and said, 'one other thing Potter, while the contract requires me to remain a virgin till I am married, the same does not apply for you. So you'd better see to it that you have me screaming on our first night as a married couple. Understand?'

Harry gulped, 'sure thing.'

After that one meeting, they had decided to pick up at school. Harry had suggested that they write to each other over the summer, but Daphne shot that down as she found it impersonal and slightly cliché.

Bringing himself back to the present, Harry went upstairs for a bath.

Returning back to his room, he was just about to put on his pants when Ron Weasley took that moment to burst through the door.

'Harry! I didn't know you wer-' he was cut short as a startled Harry Potter wandlessly banished him out of the room closing the door firmly in his face, only getting a fleeting glance at his friend's nude body.

'Damn it Weasley, haven't you heard of knocking?' Harry shouted out through the door as the situation and its full implications had finally sunk in; his best friend had gotten into the room without much of a warning and had literally caught Harry with his pants down. Worse yet was the fleeting glimpse he had caught of Hermione before the door had fully shut. While he had gotten used to Ron seeing him like this (he did share a dorm with four other boys after all) what worried him was that Hermione had possibly seen him. He hoped to whatever power that was out there that she hadn't seen anything or he really had no idea what he was going to do. Staying locked up in this room till the end of time sounded like a great idea right now.

Ron coughed nervously at this. He still had no idea how he had been propelled out of the door and nearly on his arse and was quite confused about it. He also did not understand why Harry was so shy all of a sudden. After all, they had shared a dorm with each other for the past five years, and were quite used to seeing each other in various states of undress. Besides, it wasn't as if he had seen anything.

Before he could say anything however, Hermione took that moment to make her presence known, finally answering Ron's question of why Harry was being shy.

'Ronald Weasley, that was completely rude! How would you like it if I had barged into your room while you were getting dressed?'

'Well, he should have locked the door then!' said Ron defensively turning red at the prospect of Hermione seeing him without any clothes. 'I had no idea that he would be starkers in there! Besides, I thought he was still asleep, there wouldn't have been much point of knocking on the door if that was the case?'

'And that is why the door was closed you twit!' said Harry indignantly through the door as he scrambled into a pair of jeans. Buttoning them up, he registered the second half of what Ron had said. Now completely irritated, he opened the door.

'Let me get this straight; according to you, barging in on a sleeping person is more preferable than knocking on the door? I will keep that in mind the next time you are asleep. Oh hello Hermione,' he added in the last bit acknowledging the witch in question. Upon registering the blush creeping up on her face, he realised that he had forgotten to put a shirt on.

Hermione watched as Harry strode back into the room and put a shirt on. She had to admit that her friend was looking much better than before. He seemed to have grown over the summer and had developed rather nicely. Even his face had changed somewhat. While he still looked the same, there were a few differences here and there that made him almost unrecognisable at first glance.

'What happened to your glasses Harry?' she asked him.

'Oh that, well I had this thing called a Laser in Situ Keratokinesis done that fixed my vision!'

'You mean "Laser-Assisted in Situ Keratomileusis"?' She corrected gently.

'Yeah, that.' Harry replied absently. With genuine glee he continued, 'No more glasses for me! Now I can do this.' He turned his head to the side and looked at his friends from the corner of his eyes.

'Er, what?' asked a confused Ron.

'I can look out the corner of my eyes of course! I couldn't do that before without things being blurry!' said Harry with a bit of exasperation.

'Good for you mate!' said Ron, genuinely happy for his friend even though he had no idea what the big deal was. 'What exactly is this Laser in-thingy?'

'Laser-Assisted in Situ Keratomileusis or LASIK is a type of refractive surgery for correcting myopia, hyperopia, and astigmatism. It-'

'Hold it Hermione,' said Ron laughing, cutting her off in midsentence. 'I have no idea what you are talking about.'

Hermione just huffed in response clearly miffed at being interrupted. People could be so rude at times.

Harry could see the beginnings of a major argument building up, so he decided to interject before they could get started. He did not want to start the morning off with an argument between those two.

'Basically it is a procedure to correct people's eyesight.' He said to Ron before either of them could get a word in.

'I figured that,' said Ron sarcastically. 'What I want to know is how.' Ron had become curious about Muggle things lately and wanted to know what that Lay Sick was all about.

'See, the Muggles first put these pain numbing drops on your eyes, and then make you lie down on a bed. They then put these suction cups on your eyes so that they do not move. Once they do that, they use a blade attached to a machine to make a small slice on the surface of your eyes, over here,' he pointed to the cornea of his own eye, 'to make a really thin flap with a hinge.'

'Then they fold back the flap, and use this thing called a laser which is basically a beam of really hot light, to burn along the inside of your eye. This smoothens out the imperfections. After that they just put the flap back on and send you back out.'

Harry sat back against the bed. He was pretty amused at the look of nausea on Ron's face that his description had created. He had looked up the procedure last year when he was getting rather sick of wearing those glasses. However, he couldn't get it done then as he needed permission and he did not need to get it done now. But the information was rather useful in giving credence to his story.

Hermione looked rather green as well. Harry had the feeling that she hadn't really looked that much into the surgery. This was understandable as she really had no need of doing so since she had perfect vision. He wondered why she had tried explaining it nonetheless. Sometimes he just could not understand that girl.

'Muggles do that?' Ron exclaimed incredulously. He was slightly unnerved by Harry's description and did not know if Harry was taking the Mickey or not. His eyes were actually hurting in sympathy at this description.

'Yeah, they do,' said Harry. He himself was glad that he did not have to undergo that surgery. It did sound rather painful. Not to mention the number of things that could go wrong there.

'But don't they have potions for that sort of thing?' asked Ron slightly sickened,

'Of course they don't, Ron! Then Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall wouldn't need glasses now, would they?' said Hermione

'Actually they do have a vision correction potion. It was invented rather recently, but it requires the drinker to be of a certain age group,' said Harry, causing Ron to give Hermione a smug look.

Hermione rolled her eyes at Ron and said, 'why didn't you just use the potion then?'

'Well, it is rather restricted and requires a potions master to brew it. I am not going to be asking Snape for any favours, thank you very much.'

'But Harry, if he could help you why didn't you just ask him?' Hermione tried to reason with him. 'You could try and put your differences aside for a minute you know.' She implored.

'Oh please Hermione, for all we know, Snape could botch the potion up on purpose to make Harry blind.' Ron said. 'I bet his master would be happy with that,' he said darkly.

'Honestly Ron he is on our side!' said Hermione with the air of somebody who had that argument before.

'That's what he says.'

'Well Dumbledore trusts him, so that should be enough for you.' said Hermione with finality.

'Well that does not matter because I already had my eyes fixed. I would have loved to have it done the magical way, but I got it done the Muggle way. Whatever, the end result is that I can see without my glasses. Now can we please drop it?' Harry interjected before Ron had a chance to say anything in rebuttal.

Ron and Hermione glared at each other for a moment before agreeing sullenly.

'Thank you,' said Harry. 'Now what's for breakfast? I'm starved!'

'Oh, mum's making eggs among other things. She's really going all out now that you're here. She reckons that you look half-starved,' said Ron rolling his eyes. Just then Harry noticed Hermione giving him a peculiar look as if he was sickening for something.

'So what's been going on?' asked Ron

'Nothing much,' Harry replied. 'I've been stuck at the Dursleys all this time, haven't I?'

'Oh come off it, you've been with Dumbledore!'

'It wasn't that exciting; He only wanted my help to convince this old teacher to come back for the year. His name is Horace Slughorn.'

'Oh,' said Ron disappointedly. 'We thought that-' Hermione shot Ron a warning look at that moment causing him to change track at top speed, 'we thought that it would be something like that.'

'Really,' drawled Harry visibly amused.

'Yeah, well we no longer have a Defence teacher anymore, and now with the way things are going we definitely need a new teacher for Defence. So, um, what is he like?'

'He looks a bit like a walrus and was head of Slytherin,' said Harry. 'Something wrong Hermione?'

Hermione who had a look on her face as if she was waiting for Harry to suddenly show symptoms of a major illness hastily rearranged her face into an unconvincing smile. 'It's nothing Harry. So, um, did Slughorn seem like a good teacher?'

'Dunno, though he can't be any worse than Umbridge.' said Harry not fooled one bit by Hermione's apparent change of subject. He had an idea why she was looking at him like that, if the letters he had gotten from her were any indication. All throughout the summer she had tried to get him to talk about Sirius dying. Something he wasn't too pleased about. After speaking to Remus and revisiting the few memories he had of Sirius, he had finally come to terms with Sirius' death. He wondered why Hermione was looking at him like that considering that he had told her about speaking to Remus.

'I know somebody who can be worse than Umbridge,' said Ginny irritably as she slouched into the room.

'Hey Harry,' she said before giving him a second look. 'Wow looking good there Harry!' she said slightly breathlessly. The Harry Potter standing in front of her was drastically different from the one she had seen leaving King's Cross. He was taller, and his face now had an aristocratic look to it.

'What happened to your glasses?' she asked curiously.

Before Harry could open his mouth, Ron interrupted with a shudder, 'You do not want to know. And I wish you would lay off Fleur.'

Ginny snorted in response, 'That's right, defend her,' she snapped. 'We all know that you can't get enough of her.'

Judging by the look on Ginny's and Hermione's face, Harry guessed that Ron was still affected by Fleur's Veela aura.

'Don't you get used to her now that she's around so much?' he asked his friend.

'You do, but sometimes when she pops up unexpected and catches you off guard...' he trailed off with a wistful look on his face.

'It's pathetic,' said Hermione completely disgusted as she moved to examine one of the boxes left behind by Fred and George.

'You can't honestly want her around forever?' asked Ginny incredulously.

Ron just shrugged in response. 'It's not as if we can do anything about it now.'

'Not if Mum has anything to say about it, I bet she'll put a stop to it.' Ginny responded.

'What makes you say that?' asked Harry.

'She keeps trying to get Tonks around for dinner. I reckon she is hoping that Bill falls for Tonks instead. I hope he does, I'd rather have her in the family.'

'Yeah that'll work,' said Ron sarcastically. 'Listen, no bloke in his right mind would fall for Tonks when Fleur's around. I mean she's OK-looking when she isn't doing stupid things to her hair and nose, but-'

'She's a damn sight nicer than Phlegm,' said Ginny.

'And she's more intelligent, she's an Auror!' put in Hermione from the corner, clutching a telescope she had found in one of the boxes.

'Fleur's not stupid, she was good enough to enter the Triwizard Tournament,' said Harry defensively.

'Not you as well,' said Hermione bitterly.

'I suppose that you like the way she says "'Arry ", do you?' said Ginny scornfully.

'While I do admit that the way Fleur says my name has a certain charm to it-'

'I'd much rather have Tonks in the family anyway,' said Ginny cutting Harry off. 'At least she's a laugh.'

'About that,' said Harry. 'I can say with certainty that Tonks isn't going to be falling for Bill even if Bill falls for her.'

'What would you know about that?' asked Ginny suspiciously.

'Well I know for a fact that Tonks is already spoken for and is currently very much smitten with the person she is going out with.'

'Who is it?' asked Hermione curiously as Ginny groaned on hearing the news.

'Shouldn't you be asking Tonks that?' Harry said. 'I am not telling you. It's her business anyway. All I can say is that she is currently going out with someone and is rather happy with him.' Harry honestly did not know if Tonks wanted her relationship with Remus kept a secret or not and so decided to err on the side of caution. All the girls had to do anyway was ask her directly, and, if she felt like it, Tonks would reveal who she was seeing. This way, Harry was in the clear.

Just then Ginny was called down by Mrs. Weasley leaving Harry, Ron and Hermione alone once again. The topic of conversation then changed to what Dumbledore had done with Harry the night before with Harry mentioning private lessons with him and then finally deciding to reveal the prophecy. Ron and Hermione acted as good friends should by giving sympathising with Harry and still staying on his side. The moment of sentimentality was broken when Hermione was punched in the eye with the telescope she was examining.

Further conversation was halted with Hermione rushing out in a blind panic when Harry, remembering a part of the conversation he had heard from Professor Dumbledore, mentioned that the O.W.L. results would be arriving that day itself.

As Harry followed Ron downstairs in a more sedate pace he could not help but think that something was a bit off about the whole situation. While their concern seemed genuine, Ron and Hermione

did not seem too surprised by the full contents of the prophecy. Also the letters he had received from them over the summer seemed a bit off too. Harry was slightly irritated with his friends because they had hardly written to him while he was there with those Muggles. It was just like last summer; the difference being that this time they seemed to have grown some sense and had stopped alluding to bigger more secret things that they were privy to in their letters. Though that had only added to his worries; the last time they really had nothing to hide when they were sending him all those hints, but this time, they weren't saying anything at all. Then again, it could be Harry's paranoia talking.

As he entered the kitchen to find Mrs. Weasley tending to Hermione's black eye that had been a result of her getting punched by the trick telescope designed by the twins that she had found while talking in Fred and George's room, he pushed that irritation away. It had to be his paranoia talking. Perhaps they really had nothing to talk about and were too busy to write to him that often. Perhaps they had also decided to leave him alone for a while to give him time and space to come to terms with Sirius' death and grieve? After all he himself had barely written to them. Yes, it had to be it. There was nothing dodgy going on. After all, it wasn't as if they were getting paid to be his friends or something!

He could easily get to the bottom of the whole thing by using Legilimency. But he did not want to do so. They were his friends after all, and he did trust them. It was here that Harry finally realised the temptations and responsibilities a Legilimens had. It would be more than easy to just give into temptation and find out what a person was thinking by rifling through their thoughts, but Harry had learnt to appreciate privacy growing up and did not feel comfortable about violating somebody else's privacy. In the end Harry made a vow to himself that he would never go through the minds of his friends. They hadn't done anything to shake his trust in them, so he would in turn trust them enough to not scan their minds fully. No he would not start abusing his gift by mind raping other people. He was not like Voldemort at all. Or Snape for that matter

As Harry dug into the large breakfast that Mrs. Weasley and Fleur had cooked up, Harry's train of thought wandered off to other topics. The instances where he had perused the thoughts of all those Muggles without any thought for their privacy did not even cross his mind at all.

'Where did your glasses go Harry dear?' asked Mrs. Weasley curiously. She couldn't remember if he had worn them last night or earlier this morning as she was distracted with other things.

At her question, Ron shuddered and said, 'You don't want to know mum!'

'Oh please Ron, it can't be that bad!' said Ginny. She herself was curious about that and pretty peeved at Ron for interrupting her when she had asked that question. Ignoring Ron's frantic gestures, she repeated the question to Harry.

Five minutes later, both the Weasley women and Fleur understood why Ron and Hermione had looks of nausea on their faces and why Ron had not wanted that story repeated as mother and daughter turned an unflattering but identical shade of green while Fleur still managed to look fetching even while nauseous.

After spending five minutes of reassuring Mrs. Weasley that he did not need to have his eyes looked at by Madame Pomfrey or the healers at St. Mungo's, Harry got back to his breakfast reflecting that it was quite an entertaining story to tell.

They were interrupted again by Hermione who had barely touched her food and kept looking out of the window had just spotted three owls winging their way to the Burrow.

'Oh, our O.W.L. results!' she squeaked as she hurriedly stood up and hurried toward the window, knocking her chair over in the process.

Harry suddenly not feeling very hungry got up and stood next to Hermione as he observed the approaching owls. He was shortly joined by Ron who stood on Hermione's other side.

Hermione gripped their arms tightly as she fretted over the results soon approaching, certain that she had failed everything. Her nervousness had affected Harry somewhat as well. He knew that he hadn't done as well as he could on some of the subjects, and only hoped that he hadn't failed everything as well.

A few minutes later, Harry found much to his relief that his worst fears were unfounded. He had done quite well in all his subjects with the only exception being History of Magic and Divination, two subjects he was glad to be rid of. He had even scored an O+ in Defence with extra credit given for his Patronus! He was pleasantly surprised to note that not only had he also managed to scrape an O in Transfiguration and Charms as well but had somehow gotten an E+ in his Potions O.W.L. of course that meant that he wouldn't be able to get into Snape's N.E.W.T. class, but he wasn't unhappy over that. He no longer wished to be an Auror. After all, now that he looked back on it, chasing Dark Lords for the rest of his life did not sound that appealing anymore. Besides, managing his estate would take up most of his time and he really wasn't hurting for money. Perhaps he would try and play Quidditch professionally.

Harry was brought back to the present when Hermione somewhat impatiently asked what he had gotten. He swapped his results with his friends; Ron's scores were more or less similar to Harry's except that he had only gotten Es in Transfiguration, Charms and Defence. Hermione had quite predictably gotten Os in all of her subjects except in Defence where, to Harry's immense surprise, she had obtained an E. Harry looked back at Hermione and intently studied her face when he saw her scores. She didn't seem too disappointed.

Suddenly feeling ravenous, Harry finished his breakfast at top speed while an excited Hermione started filling out her application form for the N.E.W.T. classes she would be taking. Finishing his breakfast, Harry took out the envelope for the required form and filled in what N.E.W.T. classes he wanted to take.

'Seven O.W.L.s, that's more than what Fred and George got together!' Commented Mrs. Weasley with a hint of pride when she saw Ron's result.

Harry nearly choked on the glass of pumpkin juice he was drinking when he heard this news. They really didn't care! He thought in incredulity. He was pretty amazed at the level of dedication they had shown towards their dream. Now that he thought about it, he could fully appreciate what the one thousand Galleons he had given to them two years back meant to them. If it wasn't for that money, they wouldn't have been able to get a decent enough job. No wonder they listed me as a partner, he thought as all the objections he had

about his made being a partner died down. I was the person who made their dream a reality!

Just then Bill walked into the house with the intention of meeting Fleur and possibly having some of his mum's cooking. As he turned to greet Harry after greeting everybody, the sparkle of the diamond solitaire in the younger wizard's earring easily caught his well trained eyes.

'Nice earring you got there Harry,' he said conversationally.

'What? Harry has an earring?' said Mrs. Weasley as she and Hermione both looked a bit closer at Harry. And sure enough glinting innocently back at them on Harry's left earlobe was a single stud. Bill grinned on hearing this. He was surprised that his mum hadn't caught that yet.

All the occupants of the room waited with bated breath as they watched Mrs. Weasley slowly register the presence of the earring on Harry's ear. It was no secret to them that Mrs. Weasley was a bit conservative, if her reactions to Bill's earring and hair were any indication. Harry was especially nervous since it was him she would be directing her ire at. Not that he would be listening to her. She wasn't his mother after all.

Mrs. Weasley indeed looked like she was going to say something. However, before saying anything, her expression changed as she seemed to reconsider her words. Finally she opened her mouth and said rather calmly, 'it looks good on you dear.' She then turned around and flicked her wand as she started washing the dishes much to the astonishment of everybody else.

Bill especially was stunned. He was really looking forward to having somebody else in the house being lectured by his mum about having an earring or long hair for a change. 'But, mum, he has an earring' he said in a near whine. 'Why does that not bother you?'

'Well, Harry's earring is far more tasteful and elegant compared to that horrible great fang that you have dangling from your ear Bill!' snapped Molly Weasley as she rounded on her eldest son. 'And I would like to think that my grown son, who is about to get married would have at least stopped whinging like a five year old by now!' She said severely.

Bill just rolled his eyes as he sat down for breakfast, partly amused and partly frustrated. He had no idea why his mother was acting like this ever since he had come home with Fleur.

Hermione on the other hand looked rather disapprovingly at Harry. 'Harry James Potter! How could you get an ear pierced? It is completely unacceptable! What will they say in school?'

'Well, I went to this place where they do tattoos and ear piercings and I thought to myself, "hey, why not get my ear pierced?" so I walk in and ask the guy behind the counter and he says, "Just step this way sir." He makes me sit down on a chair, takes out this gun thing, swabs my ear with some disinfectant and local anaesthesia and shoots a hole into my ear!' said Harry with false brightness, thoroughly annoying Hermione.

'And before you ask, Professor Dumbledore, the Headmaster of the school saw my earring and did not say a thing! So there!' Harry finished, glaring at her.

'I think it looks rather nice,' said Ginny into the uncomfortable silence. Hermione just huffed at this refusing to speak to anybody. She was shocked that Mrs. Weasley hadn't said anything against Harry's earring.

'Thanks Ginny,' said Harry. He smiled at her, breaking the tension that had built up.

The immediate silence was broken by renewed groans from everybody in the kitchen when Bill innocently asked, 'so, why aren't you wearing your glasses anymore, Harry?'

So here's chapter ten ... finally...

For those who were wondering why I took so long, well I had a major revelation a few days back;

1. Things put in the microwave oven are heated from inside out. Thus if the bread of, say, a sandwich, is warm, the filling will be really hot!

2. Micro-waved bread is rather rubbery.

3. When eating a micro-waved sandwich, there is a good chance that the filling can ooze out of the other end. Especially if the filling has gravy.

4. One should take care to ensure that one's fingers aren't between the pieces of bread at the other end when eating such a sandwich.

And finally and most importantly,

5. It can be bloody hard to type with burnt fingers!

On another unrelated note; an ice cold five hundred ml PET bottle of Coca Cola is an excellent substitute for an ice pack! Especially if one has burnt their fingers ... since it is rather easy to fit burnt fingers through the gaps at the bottom.

Oh, one other thing, when stepping into a shower stall with high pressure body jets, in a house supplied by instant hot water one must make sure that one does not turn on the hot water at full blast. It may burn your stomach ... if you are lucky ... thankfully, I was that lucky!

So that's been my life the last couple of weeks ... got burnt when eating a sandwich and having a bath ... all on the same day! Fun, innit!

The next few days passed by quickly within the confines of the Burrow with Harry continuing with his training early every morning. He spent the rest of the day with his friends mucking about in the orchard playing two-a-side Quidditch, occasionally going for a swim in the pond nearby and his evenings having triple helpings of whatever Mrs. Weasley put in front of him.

On his sixteenth birthday, Harry had privately made plans to go somewhere for the night in order to have a proper celebration. He was feeling restless and cooped up from being forced to stay within the boundary walls of the Weasley property. The stories of unexplained disappearances, odd accidents and even deaths that appeared almost every day in the Prophet had also put a damper in what should have been a happy and peaceful holiday. Sometimes, they would get news from Mr. Weasley and Bill even before it hit the papers.

His decision was further cemented on the day of his birthday when Remus Lupin, much to Mrs. Weasley's displeasure, brought home some grisly news.

'There has been another spate of Dementor attacks,' he announced as he accepted a slice of birthday cake from Mrs. Weasley. 'They have also found Igor Karkaroff's body in a shack up north with the Dark Mark hovering over it. Frankly I'm surprised he lasted this long. From what I heard, Sirius' brother Regulus only lasted a couple of days before they caught up to him.'

That night after everybody had retired for the night, Harry snuck out of his room. Moving stealthily, he stole out of the house and made his way to the edge of the wards. From some experimentation over the past few days, Harry had reached the conclusion that the wards did not extend to the orchard. A potential weak spot should the Death Eaters come calling. After asking Bill some subtle questions about the wards, Harry found out that the orchard had a Detection Charm placed that would detect the presence of any person not keyed into the wards. This made sneaking in and out rather easy as Harry had already been keyed into the wards. In short, the Burrow had wards meant to keep people out, not in. Thus, allowing free movement of the persons residing within its walls.

Armed with this information, Harry made his way to the Orchard where he then silently Disapparated to London to begin his birthday celebrations.

He returned at around two in the morning leaving behind a sleeping brunette whose name he had already forgotten, who would no doubt be pitching a fit when she found herself alone in the morning. Early on, Harry had found that it took a lot of alcohol to get him even close to tipsy. He supposed that it was due to the magic he possessed that neutralised the effects of alcohol. Either that or his current size was the reason (he still was having difficulties in thinking of himself as tall or "big" as some people put it). While the obvious advantage of this was that he could probably win any drinking contest, Harry was still disappointed as he really wanted to know what it was to become utterly pissed and hadn't yet managed that despite having chased his drinks. Hopefully Wizarding liquor would be potent enough to get him drunk.

As he managed to successfully sneak back into his room silently congratulating himself on his conquest, he spied a parcel on his bed with a letter on top of it. Harry opened the letter first;

Dear Mr. Potter, it read

I am eternally grateful to you for your timely warning about the impending attack upon my person and business. I shudder to think what would have transpired had you not been able to warn me. I most likely would have been a guest of the Dark Lord's.

As it is, it is definitely fortunate you had managed to warn me of the attack. I had enough time to employ the counter measures my ancestors had placed in order to repel Dark Wizards.

In thanks I send to you this copy of the Tales of Beedle the Bard. It is a one of a kind copy which had been given to me a long time back. While most would call the stories held within fanciful tales for children, there are yet others that claim that these tales are actual documentations of real events that have happened over time. I leave the decision up to you. Make what you will out of the exquisite work of art that this book is as you enjoy the many tales within.

Wishing you a merry birthday, I remain,

Yours,

Ollivander

Opening the parcel, Harry gasped as he laid eyes upon the book within. The book was a hardback, the cover made of cherry and gold leaf. The art work on it was inlaid with precious stones. Opening the gilded pages revealed the exquisite calligraphy with the historiated initials done in painstaking detail. The ink used actually shimmered and seemed to be lit from within.

The book was in short so beautiful that it would incite even the most reluctant of readers to start reading.

Carefully putting the book back into the silk slip it had come in, Harry placed it in his trunk before turning in for the night.

Their Hogwarts letters came in the very next day. Harry's had a surprise for him. He had been made the Quidditch captain.

'Brilliant mate, this puts you on an equal footing to us prefects!' said Ron. 'You can use the prefects' bathroom and everything! I guess I should call you my captain now ... that is if you'll let me in the team.'

Harry examined the scarlet badge with a golden "C" superimposed over the Gryffindor lion and smiled. He was happy that he had made Quidditch Captain over Katie who had more experience than him. Looking up at Ron he said teasingly, 'Well, you'll have to practise more now if you want that spot Weasley.'

Remembering at the last moment about the request he wanted to make to Professor McGonagall he quickly wrote a small note asking her about the Runes and Arithmancy classes and attached it to the school owl. The owl gave him a dirty look for having called it back just as it was about to take off before winging its way back to Hogwarts.

He turned back to the conversation that was taking place between Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Ron and Hermione just as they had managed to convince Mrs. Weasley to go shopping in Diagon Alley the next day for school supplies.

They all left the next morning after Mrs. Weasley gave Ron a tongue lashing over making jokes about the security measures that she was discussing with them. As the Floo was potentially more risky, they left for the Alley in cars provided by the Ministry. Harry sat between Hermione and Ron and across from Ginny. As Ron wasn't exactly conversation material since he was still sulking and Hermione was trying to calm him down, Harry found himself making idle conversation with Ginny.

Upon reaching the Leaky Cauldron they found out that their security detail was Hagrid who greeted them at the entrance to the pub. Harry knew that the security was more for him than because Mr. Weasley had been promoted, as Mrs. Weasley claimed, but did not say anything, even though the thought of being treated like an ignorant child did chafe at him a bit.

As the portal opened at the back of the pub, Harry was greeted by the sight of a much changed Diagon Alley. In the intervening couple of days between his last visit to the Alley and now, a lot of small shabby makeshift stalls had sprung up out of the woodwork selling all sorts of protective charms and potions. Their presence gave the Alley an air of gloom. The boarded up storefronts of some of the shops (the most prominent of them being Fortescue's) and the furtive and tense looks of the shoppers in the abnormally quiet Alley did not help matters any.

They walked forward in a tense silence with Mr. Weasley sending the stall vendors dirty looks and muttering darkly to himself while Mrs. Weasley warned him nervously in a hushed voice not to do anything rash.

Their first stop was Flourish and Blotts (which was, mercifully, still open) where they got the books on their list. Harry slipped in a copy of the third and fourth year Ancient Runes and Arithmancy textbooks. As they stepped out of the bookstore, Mr. Weasley turned to his wife and said, 'Why don't we split up? These three can go with Hagrid and get their robes while the two of us and Ginny can go to the Apothecary and restock Hermione and Ginny's Potions kit. This way we can get things over with faster. We can meet them at Fred and George's place.'

Mrs. Weasley still looked undecided, so Hermione pointed out that Ron and Harry definitely needed new robes and that nobody would

be foolish enough to mess with Hagrid. Finally convinced, Mrs. Weasley agreed to split off and moved with her husband and a visibly disappointed Ginny.

Entering Madame Malkin's shop, they ran into Draco Malfoy who was wearing pinned up dress robes. Harry hung back as he watched Malfoy start insulting Hermione and Ron. He did not draw his wand like Ron had done the minute he had laid eyes on the blonde, but he was still alert nonetheless as he discreetly placed himself a bit behind Malfoy pretending to peruse the selection of dress robes while keeping an eye on the boy, ready for action should Malfoy think of doing anything funny. Knowing that Malfoy was right handed, Harry made sure to stay on his left. That way, the other boy would have to put in more effort to bring his wand to bear.

'So where's Potter? Was he too afraid to show his face around here?' said Malfoy sneering after finishing with Hermione.

'Draco old chap!' said Harry with false cheer, startling the other boy. 'How are you doing these days? I trust you are in good health? How's the family?' he asked with an innocent expression on his face that fooled nobody.

Malfoy turned a faint pink as his eyes flashed in anger at that subtle barb made against his father. 'Just you wait Potter, The Dark Lord-

'-will one day find me and capture me which will culminate in my long, drawn out and painful death. After which, he will take over the world, ridding it of the "impure,"' Harry cut Malfoy off mid-rant with a bored voice, rolling his eyes. 'Haven't you come up with any new material to taunt me with yet? I suggest you do so, because frankly the old stuff's getting a bit boring,' he said conversationally.

Not expecting such a reaction Malfoy sputtered as he thought of a suitable response. However, before he could say anything, Narcissa Malfoy came out from where she was talking to Madame Malkin about a new wardrobe for her son. She was unpleasantly surprised to see her son standing off against two other people.

Mentally, she sighed, couldn't he for one moment in his life think twice? Schooling her features, Narcissa gave a contemptuous look to the youngest spawn of those blood-traitor Weasleys. Noting the drawn wand, she said coldly, 'Put that away right now, boy. If you

attack my son again I will ensure that it is the last thing you ever do!' Casting her eyes at the Mudblood, she sneered with obvious disdain before looking away from the two with a sniff and obvious dismissal; they really were not worth her time whatsoever. What surprised her was the absence of their ringleader and the only reason why people even gave the blood-traitor and Mudblood any attention, Harry Potter.

At that moment, she laid eyes on a handsome aristocratic young man watching the scene in front of him almost casually. Her eyes narrowed as she took in his features. The boy had the patrician nose and high cheekbones of a Black. In fact, from a certain angle, she could almost mistake him for her estranged and late cousin Sirius.

As she picked out the scar on the boy's forehead, she inhaled through her nose with a sharp hiss. That's Potter. But how did he end up looking like my cousin Sirius? This bore looking into...

Ronald Weasley eyed Mrs. Malfoy suspiciously as she stared at his best mate. He did not know why she was looking at him so calculatingly but he did not like it one bit. She's up to something,

he thought darkly.

Madame Malkin did not know what to do in the rising tension in her shop. She really did not want a fight to break out. Especially when it involved a high paying regular, especially now given the state of things. She already had to make do without two of her employees as they had elected to flee the country. So she decided that if she acted as if nothing was happening, hopefully the situation would resolve itself peacefully. With that in mind, she reached for the sleeve of the dress robes that young Master Malfoy was wearing. It was one of her finest creations. 'I think that the left sleeve needs some adjusting,' she said.

Draco Malfoy yelped at the sudden contact as Malkin's hand brushed his arm. His Lord had recently Marked him and the skin there was still tender even though it no longer was inflamed. This had the side effect of focussing everybody's attention on him. Thinking quickly, he covered his actions by loudly insulting Madame Malkin and making a production of it, left the shop followed by his mother, confident that neither Potter nor that Mudblood know-it-all

had seen the Mark. He wasn't too worried about the Weasel. He was too dumb to figure anything out.

Narcissa watched as her son tried to cover his actions by loudly blaming the woman who had been measuring him and many others for more than three decades with some irritation and a little hint of fear; it was still some time left for the healing period to be completed, and the Mark was still visible till that time. Only after the healing period would the Mark become hidden, visible only to their brethren. Only showing when their Lord called. Draco could not afford for the Mark to be seen on his flesh, especially by Potter and his ilk. Hopefully, they hadn't seen it.

She had even warned him not to go out in public till the skin had healed and the Mark had concealed itself. But no, he wouldn't listen! Sighing in resignation, Narcissa gave a look to Madame Malkin that the other woman acknowledged as an apology. The Blacks as well as the Malfoys along with many other pureblood families had a long standing relationship with the establishment and she was not about to let that be jeopardised by her son. She would be coming over later to collect the rest of the order and soothe Madame Malkin's ruffled feathers. If Draco ended up with ill fitting robes, it was not her fault. Not that she expected that issue to crop up. Madame Malkin was rather gifted.

In her somewhat distracted state of mind, Narcissa did not notice Ron's eyes as they widened imperceptibly as he caught a fleeting glimpse of black against the pale skin of Malfoy's arm when the sleeve was raised for that one small instant in time.

Ron waited till an irritated Madame Malkin started measuring Harry. When he saw that they were suitably occupied, he pulled Hermione aside and in hushed tones told her about his discovery.

'But he's only sixteen! Surely Voldemort wouldn't think of recruiting a sixteen year old into his ranks?' said Hermione in a hushed voice, ignoring as always the small flinch Ron gave as she uttered the forbidden name.

'Hermione, who knows what You-Know-Who thinks and why he does what he does,' Ron replied. He checked to see if Harry was still occupied, 'for all we know, this could be a clever ploy by You-Know-Who to take over Hogwarts!'

Hermione seemed to consider this before asking hesitantly, 'You're sure you saw the Dark Mark on his arm right?'

Ron just nodded in response. Hermione bit her lower lip as she thought of this. 'We should tell Harry about this,' she decided.

Ron immediately interrupted her before she could further that thought. 'Actually I don't think we should. No, listen,' he hastily continued as Hermione was about to protest, 'Harry already has a lot on his plate. He already has You-Know-Who to worry about, those classes with Dumbledore won't be much of a picnic, and he has also just lost his godfather he does not need to deal with this. Besides, Dumbledore told us to take care of him. We can do this without having to worry him. You and I can easily find out what he is up to and we don't need to worry Harry. Let him have a nice normal year for once.'

Ron watched Hermione's lower lip as she worried it with her teeth. She really is beautiful when she does that he thought. He immediately shook himself from that line of thinking as she opened her mouth to speak.

'Yeah, you're right Ron. Let Harry have this one year without having to worry about what Voldemort and his minions are planning. Though, I don't know if we will be able to figure this out on our own. Perhaps we should tell Dumbledore?'

'Nah, the man's busy enough as it is. Besides, Malfoy won't have a chance! Not with the smartest witch in Hogwarts on his case!'

Hermione blushed at this compliment and swatted his arm in response, trying and failing to show how much it had affected her. Not to be fooled by this, Ron's smile grew even more at that.

Just then a throat was cleared, causing them to realise just how close to each other they were. Jumping apart and blushing deeply, they turned around to find a Madame Malkin and Harry Potter staring at them. Seeing the knowing smirk on their friend's face only caused them to blush even more as they avoided eye contact with each other.

Madame Malkin didn't seem to be as irritated as before, though she still looked a bit unhappy with them. She disappeared in the back of the store along with Harry leaving both Ron and Hermione at the tender mercies of two young and inexperienced employees who proceeded to actually do the one thing Draco Malfoy had accused her of in abundance.

Five minutes later, they were ushered out of the shop by Madame Malkin who had the air of being glad of seeing their backs. Harry, however, got a warm goodbye, seeing as he had just commissioned a new wardrobe to be delivered later on by owl post.

They met up with the rest of their party at Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, a garishly decorated building that unlike the rest of the stores in Diagon Alley was pretty busy with customers coming into the shop in droves. A fact that Harry was sure wasn't earning them any charitable thoughts from the other shop owners as he looked at the different products that were banging, flashing, popping and whirling in fascination. He had to turn away after a while as it was beginning to hurt his eyes.

Snickering at the U-No-Poo poster, Harry led the way into the shop followed by Ron who was assuring Mrs. Weasley that her twin sons won't be "murdered in their beds" as she put it.

The shop was packed with customers; Harry could not reach the shelves. He looked at the different boxes stacked up to the ceiling full of different things the twins had invented. He had noticed that their Skiving Snackboxes were quite popular, with Nosebleed Nougat being a favourite, judging by the one battered box still left in an otherwise empty shelf.

Hermione pushed through the crowd towards Harry reading off a box of Daydream Charms. "One simple incantation, and you will enter a highly realistic thirty minute daydream, easy to fit into the average school lesson and virtually undetectable (side effects include a vacant expression and mild drooling) not for sale to under sixteens." That is impressive magic!' she said.

'For that Hermione,' said a beaming Fred as he sidled up to them wearing magenta robes that clashed magnificently with his hair. 'You can have one for free.'

He shook hands with Harry. 'Hey, Harry, looking good there! I see you've managed to lose the glasses, though I have been told not to ask you how.' Looking at Hermione again he asked her about the black eye she was sporting. Leaving her with the bruise salve that he and George used frequently he set off with Harry giving him a tour of the establishment, showing him the range of products he and George had managed to create. They met George near the display full of Muggle tricks ('for freaks like dad,') where they took Harry to a less crowded room at the back. The products of this room had a more subdued packaging.

'This is where we make most of our money,' said Fred waving a hand at the shelves. 'Initially we had started making Shield Hats as a joke. You know, challenge your mate to jinx you wearing the hat and then watch his face as it bounces back. But the Ministry soon ordered a large amount for their support staff! And we're still getting massive orders!'

'So we started our defence line,' continued George. 'Not only did we expand to Shield Cloaks and Gloves, which, while they won't be much use against the Unforgiveables will help deflect minor jinxes and curses. We also have Instant Darkness Powder that we are importing from Peru. Handy if you want to make a quick escape.'

'Look at these, Decoy Detonators. Just drop them surreptitiously and they run off and make a lot of noise somewhere nicely hidden, handy for creating diversions,' said Fred, showing Harry a couple of weird looking black hooter-type objects trying to scurry out of sight.

'Impressive,' said Harry.

'Here, have a few,' said Fred as he put a handful of the Darkness Powder and some of the Detonators into two bags which he handed to Harry.

'Now, none of that!' said George suddenly with a frown, 'We haven't forgotten what you have done for us, and for that, whatever you take is free. Just be sure to tell people where you got it from.' In response to that, Harry withdrew his hand from his pocket where he was about to get his money-bag out without putting up much of a fuss.

'Mr. Weasley, a customer is out at the front wanting to buy a fake cauldron,' a voice from the entrance to the back room said. Turning

around, Harry saw a young blonde woman dressed in magenta robes addressing the twins.

'Right you are, Verity, I'm coming,' said George following her out.

'She looks a lot like Rita Skeeter,' Harry told Fred, suddenly figuring the resemblance as they made their way out to the front of the store.

'Does she now?' Fred squinted at Verity, 'I think you're right, she does look a lot like Rita. I never figured that. Poor girl,' he winced in sympathy.

'It's pretty ironic though ... when you think of her name and all,' Fred mused as he moved towards a customer.

Harry wandered around the store before making his way towards the girls where he noticed that Fred and Ginny were having a rather heated argument if the way Ginny was glaring at her older brother (so reminiscent of Mrs. Weasley, that Harry was surprised Fred didn't recoil in horror) was to go by.

Catching the end of the conversation, Harry figured that it had something to do with the display of Love Potions that was nearby. Glancing at the gaggle of giggling girls surrounding the display, occasionally eyeing him and the other boys in the shop, Harry had a feeling that he would need to learn potion detection spells and fast. And probably research on antidotes as well. If Ginny was planning on buying a love potion ... Harry shuddered to think what other girls would do.

He joined them just in time to find out that Fred and George's generosity only extended to him and not to their little brother, even though they did give Ron a Knut's worth discount. Shaking his head and not understanding the dynamics of a sibling relationship, Harry bent to examine the little balls of fluff that the girls were making noises at. He personally didn't see what was so exciting about them. But he supposed that if the girls liked them and since they seemed to be in high demand according to Fred, they could be useful gift material.

After his mother had finished threatening to hex his fingers together, Ron chanced a glance out of the window to see Malfoy looking surreptitiously around him before ducking out of sight. Instantly

suspicious he nudged Hermione and in hushed whispers explained what he had seen. He noticed that Harry hadn't seen Malfoy and, making a split decision, acted.

Harry watched with amusement as Ginny bought a purple Pygmy Puff and promptly named it Arnold.

'Arnold?' he asked her in amusement. 'I have to admit it's certainly an improvement over Pigwidgeon.'

Ginny looked around her, and seeing her brother occupied with Hermione leaned in and whispered, 'There is a reason I named Ron's owl that.'

Intrigued, Harry asked, 'And what reason is that Miss Weasley?'

'Oh to understand, you will have to look "Pigwidgeon" up in a dictionary.' She smirked as she saw his raised eyebrows, 'Trust me, it'll be more fun if you do it that way.'

Wrapped up in his conversation with Ginny, Harry was thus unaware of his surroundings, so he did not feel Ron's hand snake into his pocket where he had kept his Invisibility Cloak.

After talking to Ginny, he had taken a few steps forward to another of Fred and George's display when he felt the lightness in his left trouser pocket. Face suddenly white and heart thumping wildly, Harry felt for his Cloak only to find it gone. Suddenly feeling very cold, he searched frantically around the floor of the shop hoping that it had just fallen out of his pocket, his hands in his pockets feeling for the cloak that wasn't there.

Finally, just as he was beginning to think that he had lost the Cloak that was in his family for so many generations for good, Mrs. Weasley, who, along with the rest of the Weasleys was helping him search for the Cloak, noticed Ron and Hermione's absence. After that it was only a matter of seconds for everybody to come to the same conclusion.

And so when Ron appeared with Hermione at the shop a few minutes later, he found himself facing his mother in full sabretoothed tiger mode with Ginny standing right next to her looking so much like her mother it wasn't funny. Gulping, Ron braced himself

for a full blast of his mother's ire as Molly Weasley asked in a dangerous voice, 'Where. Were. You?'

Immediately Ron's hands tightened around Harry's cloak that he had behind his back while he thought of a suitable excuse.

'Erm, ah, I-I was at the back. W-with Hermione! We were looking at Fred and George's stuff. Didn't you see us?'

Instead of cooling down as he had hoped, the expression on his mother's face darkened even more till she was sporting a look that would have a normal sabre-toothed tiger running for the hills as she positively vibrated with rage. Ron watched with morbid fascination and a lot of dread as his mother seemed to inflate as she took a deep breath to unleash her wrath on her youngest son. He was only saved at the last minute when a hand belonging to his father landed on her shoulder. 'Not here Molly,' he whispered quietly into her ear while looking around at the people in the shop.

His mum exhaled loudly before nodding to his dad and Ron sighed in relief at the potential social disaster that was averted. He was sure that he wouldn't be able to live it down if his mother berated him in public. Then again, as he noticed the serious look on his father's face, he was definitely dead when he got home.

The extent of his fate was fully realised when Harry then came forward. Ron was used to being able to tell what his friend was feeling or thinking just by looking at his friend's expression or seeing the emotion expressed in his eyes. However, this time, Harry's face was completely void of emotion and his eyes, normally warm with expression were a pair of cold emeralds. 'Cloak,' was the only word he had said with his arm outstretched and his tone frigid, and Ron knew just then that the whole game was up. What was worse was that he had just been caught in a lie by his mother.

Gulping Ron quietly handed Harry his cloak back, not meeting his eyes. Thunderous expression still in place, Mrs. Weasley shepherded the group towards the front of the shop. On the way out Ron took a moment to notice that both his elder twin brothers had an alien expression of seriousness on their normally happy and mischievous faces.

They made their way towards the Leaky Cauldron with Hagrid bringing up the rear keeping a close eye on both Ron and Hermione.

The drive back was quiet but filled with a tension so thick that it had the Ministry driver looking for potential threats. Harry was carefully looking out of the window with a neutral expression. The only indicator of his feelings was the tenseness in his neck muscles and his stiff posture.

When they had reached the Burrow, Mrs. Weasley had immediately lit into Ron as well as Hermione, though Ron got the worst of it. After spending fifteen minutes yelling till she was hoarse at their irresponsible actions, the questions came; what was Ron doing that was so important with Hermione, and where had he gone?

After a lot of stammering on Ron's part, the full story had come out. Apparently Ron had decided that somebody (he won't say who) was up to something and had decided to follow him into Knockturn Alley.

'So you mean to tell me that you followed a person who may or may not have been a Death Eater, into Knockturn Alley, the same Knockturn Alley that is reputed for selling all sorts of Dark items mind you, just because this mystery person was looking shifty?' said Mrs. Weasley with a tone of disbelief.

'How did you come to possess Harry's cloak?' Mr. Weasley suddenly asked Ron.

'Erm,' said Ron looking shiftier at that question as he cast around for a plausible story to explain just how he had that cloak.

'You took it from my pocket didn't you?' said Harry quietly. His soft voice cut through the room like a knife.

'Well, not exactly-'

'Then what exactly is it Ron?' cut in Mr. Weasley sternly. 'Because judging by Harry's reaction to finding his cloak missing and the way he was searching for it and then by you having it, I don't think I would be wrong in thinking that you took it without asking Harry's permission.' Seeing that he had guessed correctly he continued, 'Taking something from someone without asking them about it is stealing Ron! I cannot believe that you would do such a thing, much

less from someone who is supposed to be your best mate!' He took a deep breath, pinching his nose under his glasses and closing his eyes.

'Right,' said Mr. Weasley opening his eyes and looking up at Ron steadily. 'You are grounded for the rest of the holiday. No flying on your broom and you will have to help your mother with the chores till then.' He waited for Ron's nod then addressing Hermione said, 'You too will be helping out as well. Unless you'd rather that we speak to your parents?' Seeing Hermione agree he turned back to his youngest son, 'Now that we have answered the matter of your disappearing into Knockturn Alley despite being strictly told not to, there is still the matter of you stealing as well as lying to your mother.' Mr. Weasley took a deep breath as if steeling himself for what was about to come before speaking, 'Go to your room, I will be there to deal with that soon.'

At that statement, Ron blanched while Mrs. Weasley inhaled sharply. The last time that her husband had said that to any of their sons was when Fred and George had tried to make Ron swear an Unbreakable Vow.

Sensing that things were over, Harry quietly retreated to his room. Setting down his purchases a bit harder than was warranted, he sunk down on the bed putting his head in his hands. Ron only had to ask for the Cloak and Harry would have gladly lent it to him. Growing up, Harry never had many possessions truly his own and he had come to cherish what he had, much like one of those mythical Dragons with their hoards of gold that he had read about a long time back (unknown to his friends, he still had a piece of his old Nimbus broom with him). The feeling was exacerbated thanks to his fat cousin. When they were younger, Dudley and his friends would relish in depriving Harry of his possessions. Often hiding them or putting them in hard to reach places.

While Harry had no problems in sharing things with his friends (since he never had that novelty of friends, much less the novelty of sharing things) he absolutely hated it when people tried to take his things away from him without his permission. It was partly the reason for him pursuing Umbridge the way he had.

But at least with Umbridge he knew what to expect, seeing as he knew where he stood with her. But for Ron, his best mate, to do such a thing? It stung deeply.

Never again he thought savagely. What Ron had done only strove to drive home a point that Harry had learnt the hard way growing up (and to his chagrin, forgotten in the last few years). People cannot be trusted, and it was up to Harry to ensure that they couldn't take advantage of him again. Dumbledore had done the same thing to Harry too (interestingly it involved the Cloak as well) and now in lieu of Ron doing the same thing, Harry came to a decision; It would not happen again.

Thinking thus, Harry dove into his trunk and retrieved a book on wards he had taken from the Potter Family vault. Judging by some of the wards he had seen in the book earlier, Harry had come to two conclusions; firstly, the Potters were an intensely private family, and secondly, they really liked using some really obscure wards that, if the book was right, were only known to members of the family.

Looking through some of the wards detailed there, Harry cast a few basic ones on his trunk. He would only be able to do the more complicated ones after some classes in Arithmancy and Runes. What little he could cast was based off his self taught knowledge on the subjects.

His wards set, he sent a note to Madame Malkin if she could include those extra charms on his robes that she was talking about which would prevent pickpockets taking advantage of him. He would set about the difficult task of enchanting his current wardrobe against thievery on his own. The process was rather tiresome since it required a lot of magic, and would last till September. He would research other more permanent ways to ward his clothes at Hogwarts. If Madame Malkin can do it, so can he!

Arthur Weasley didn't like to punish his children, and as a result had left most of the disciplining up to Molly. However, Ron's actions had made his involvement necessary. Arthur hated thievery of any sort, and what Ron had done had angered him in more ways than he could imagine. Arthur had always tried to be honourable in his dealings and as honest as possible. It was his work ethic and the reputation that his family had won for being as open and honest as possible (despite being called Blood-Traitors) that was a matter of

pride for him. He sighed as he got into bed next to his wife. He hoped that he never had to do such a thing again.

The next few days had Harry being rather distant with his friends. He would've forgiven them readily had they not been rather tight lipped about what it was they were doing when they had made off with his cloak. Ron had initially given him an explanation saying that he had followed Malfoy into Knockturn Alley since he was sure that Malfoy was a Death Eater.

Harry snorted at that; Malfoy wasn't of much significance. He was only an arrogant ponce who used his daddy's name and depended on the teachers (more specifically Snape) and his thuggish bodyguards Crabbe and Goyle to get things done. Voldemort would be really desperate to recruit him! Also, with the possible exception of the seventh years, making a Hogwarts student a Death Eater was too much of a risk with little benefits. He already had Snape in the school, he didn't need another spy. Placing another spy would suggest that Voldemort no longer trusted Snape. And when Voldemort has doubts about a person, that person does not last long. And Voldemort makes sure that the whole world knows of that fact. Since there hadn't been any reports of the mutilated body of a greasy Hogwarts professor being found, Harry knew Snape was still trusted. Other than spying on the school and its headmaster, Harry couldn't think of any use in having a Death Eater in the school. And a student Death Eater especially wouldn't be of much use. He or she would be under constant scrutiny by the teachers, Filch, Dumbledore, Mrs. Norris, Filch, the Portraits, Filch, the ghosts, and Filch to get anything done.

Besides, if it really was Malfoy they had gone after, then why not include Harry in the whole escapade also? No, there was a reason that Ron had decided to take Harry's cloak like that.

Eventually in a week's time, Harry had gotten around to forgiving them. It was partly because that he felt that Ron had gotten punished well enough, if the fact that he preferred to stand the next few days was any indication. He no longer cared for what Ron and Hermione had done together under his cloak anymore. After all, it wasn't as if he didn't have any secrets of his own.

At the same time, that did not mean that he would stop his efforts to protect his possessions from people willing to steal them. For Harry trust was an issue and once broken, it took a lot to regain that trust.

As she was washing the dishes, Hermione did some thinking. Some of Mr. Weasley's words to Ron had really hit home. It got her thinking about the meeting she and Ron had with Professor Dumbledore, when he had offered them money for looking out for Harry. At first the idea seemed brilliant. Here she was getting paid for the one thing she would be doing anyway for free. And while Hermione's parents were well off, she couldn't help but think that the amount of books she bought along with her education was putting a strain on her parents' finances. The fact of the matter was that her parents were earning in Pounds but she was spending in Galleons, a stronger currency. This way, she felt that she would be able to reduce the stress put upon her parents' finances by pulling her weight. So it was quite easy for Hermione to ignore the imagined disappointment she had seen in Professor Dumbledore's eyes when she and Ron had said yes.

It was now that Hermione realised what a mistake she had made. She was basically getting paid to be Harry's friend. Shouldn't looking out for her best friend be something she should be willing to do without the need for recompense?

After all, Harry had literally risked life and limb many times for his friends (herself included) without expecting anything in return. So why should she and Ron accept money or any other incentive for looking out for their friend? Didn't friends look out for each other voluntarily?

Hermione felt ashamed at her actions. While it was true that Professor Dumbledore had offered her the money and that he was technically the adult in the situation, she still should have known better. Well, she decided, that won't happen ever again. The first thing she would do when term started would be to meet Professor Dumbledore and give back that money.

She also resolved to talk to Ron about it as well. Thinking on it now, she figured that Professor Dumbledore was testing her. It truly upset her to know that she had failed the first time.

It was a small consolation that she hadn't fully failed the headmaster or her friend.

Never again, she thought. She would never fail her friend like that again. It was a good thing that Harry didn't know about this. She was sure that the knowledge would probably end their relationship.

Ron didn't regret his decision to take Harry's cloak in Diagon Alley. It was after all for a noble cause. The chance to get to know what Malfoy was up to was even worth the punishment afterwards, though he did not wish to face his father's wrath again. Fred certainly wasn't exaggerating when he said that his left buttock never felt the same. It really was too bad that he hadn't found out exactly what Malfoy was after.

Oh well, the next day they were going to be heading to Hogwarts. Malfoy would be there in the school, right where Ron can keep an eye on him. He refused to let You-Know-Who get his way this time, or (if Ron had a say in it) ever again till the day Harry managed to complete the prophecy and finish Him off.

Authors Notes:

Well here we are ... Chapter eleven!

1. About the concealable Dark Mark; Well, JK never did say that the Mark was visible to everybody at all times ... my theory is that the Mark fades within a few days into the skin but can only be seen by another person with the Mark ... cause face it, how stupid would you have to be to put a tattoo in such a freaking obvious place? Voldemort may be insane, but he isn't stupid ... otherwise, it would be more than easy to lock up the Death Eaters ... just make short sleeves compulsory at the ministry, or check everyone's forearms ... it does not take a genius to figure it out.

Hagrid had said that you never knew who was a Death Eater and who wasn't in the first war ... at the same time everybody knew what the Dark Mark looked like and who used it ... so it cannot be that the average wizard does not know what that snazzy tattoo on the left forearm of his/her friend/colleague/amorous lover represents ... so conclusion; the Dark Mark on the Death Eaters arms has to be concealable unless Voldemort is calling them or they activate it ... that would account for non Death Eaters who didn't have a special connection to Voldemort seeing it ...

2. Historitaded Initials; well those are really cool ... Google them ...
it's worth it!

Ron and Hermione spent the last few days agonising over what Malfoy was up to. They were careful to ensure that Harry did not hear a word of that discussion along with other members in the Burrow. As a result of which, they would often disappear alone together, something that Harry and Ginny had noticed but paid scant attention to. Harry for one had better things to do with his time and every moment they were busy with each other was time he could do whatever he wanted to do without their notice. Of course there still was Ginny, but as she had spent most of the summer writing to Dean or visiting Luna Lovegood, it meant that Harry had all the time to do whatever he chose to do. All he had to do was ensure that he had a plausible alibi. Something he took great pains in ensuring.

He also hung around with Bill a lot. It had started out with Bill tutoring him in Runes and Arithmancy, as Bill knew a lot of the subjects due to his profession. It then grew from there to include lessons in unarmed combat since Bill thought that Harry should know how to throw a punch effectively. Eventually he and Harry had built a rapport between them till Harry almost looked to Bill as a sort of older brother. The resulting roughhousing and wrestling that the two did as a result of the sparring matches furthered this relationship.

When Bill wasn't around, Fleur certainly could be found in the Burrow. While she did not stay at the house (preferring to stay at her intended's flat) she would always be around during the day to help around the house, much to Mrs. Weasley's immense displeasure. Since Mrs. Weasley didn't have much work (or wasn't willing to let Fleur do anything in the house) that left Fleur with a lot of free time. Something she used to spend with her fellow Triwizard champion, giving him lessons in French and supplementing Bill's lessons in Runes and Arithmancy. While Fleur wasn't as knowledgeable as Bill, she was no slouch. And Harry certainly wasn't complaining. He knew she was taken, but it did not hurt to look...

All in all by the time the first of September came around, Harry had a better understanding of Runes and Arithmancy than the books could give him, along with a passing understanding of French. While Harry wasn't exactly a savant du Française, (in fact, he was complete pants at it) he still knew enough to say a few sentences ... or fake complete knowledge of the language, depending on the person (girl) he was talking to. Though the one thing he had picked up with complete proficiency was how to swear in French, much to Fleur's bemusement.

On the morning of the first, Harry was the first person out with his trunk packed and owl cage placed neatly on top with said owl in the cage. He was shortly joined by Mrs. Weasley along with the rest of his friends.

'Good to see that you had packed well in advance Harry dear,' said Mrs. Weasley. 'At least you did not leave it till the last minute,' she cast a subtle glance at Ron who completely missed the barb.

Harry just smiled in response. He had his trunk packed rather neatly by one of his elves, but did not see the wisdom in telling Mrs. Weasley that.

Bill and Fleur came out just as the Ministry cars glided to a stop in front of the Burrow.

'Au revoir 'Arry,' said Fleur throatily as she kissed Harry on both his cheeks. Because he was in her presence for so long, that only brought about a hint of colour on Harry's face. 'I look forward to meeting you again. Perhaps I will be able to teach you how to properly speak Française without sounding like an imbécile, no?'

'I doubt that, but I look forward to it regardless,' said Harry with a broad grin.

'Take care, Harry,' said Bill slapping his back. He took out a book from the pocket of his robes and surreptitiously gave it to Harry. 'A copy of a list of all the spells that I had found in my travels abroad,' he explained. 'You will also find some good wards in there as well. I hope you find it useful!'

'Wow, thanks Bill,' said Harry awed at the gift he was being given.

'It was no problem Harry. I have a feeling that you will put it to good use. Just ... take care of yourself, all right?' replied Bill gruffly.

Their moment was interrupted by a loud thud followed by a pained and indignant 'Oi!' Looking down, Harry saw that Ron was sprawled on the ground.

'Alright there mate?' he asked him as he helped his friend on his feet.

Ron just mumbled something unintelligible as he hurriedly got into the car, the tips of his ears red and his clothes dirty. Harry noticed a triumphant smirk on Ginny's face giving him an idea of what had happened. Rolling his eyes, Harry said a final goodbye to Bill and Fleur before getting inside.

'Hurry up Arthur,' called out Mrs. Weasley.

'Coming,' said Mr. Weasley as he closed the front door. He got into the car at the front along with his wife and Ginny.

And they were off in what was one of the best and smoothest departures to the station in Mrs. Weasley's opinion. Something she hadn't had the pleasure of experiencing since ... well, since before the twins' first year at school.

As they reached the station, they were met by a pair of grim faced Aurors dressed in business suits that were waiting for them with the luggage trolleys. Moving with efficiency, the Auror guard quickly escorted them toward the barrier between platforms nine and ten.

'All right,' said Mrs. Weasley nervously, slightly off balance in the face of such cold efficiency. 'Ron, you and Harry go on first with one of the Aurors. After that Hermione goes in with Ginny. We'll follow shortly after that with the remaining Auror. Is that OK?' She addressed the last part to the pair of Aurors.

The first Auror, a bearded fellow slightly shorter than Harry nodded silently and grabbed Harry's arm above the elbow. Harry immediately extricated his arm from the his grasp 'I don't think that is necessary, I am quite capable of defending myself and holding my arm is going to hamper both our movements if something does happen. However, if something does happen I promise to stick with you.' he told the Auror politely but firmly.

At this the Auror gave another nod with a look of approval on his face and set off towards the barrier with Harry following close behind.

Once everybody had crossed through, they set off towards the train. Quickly finding an empty compartment, they hefted their trunks and cages onto the luggage rack and hopped back out, where, after enduring another round of Mrs. Weasley's stifling hugs, they said their final goodbyes.

The train started moving a few minutes while they were still out in the passageway. 'Well, Ron and I have to go to the front, since, you know, we're prefects.' Hermione said awkwardly after a few moments of silence. She then proceeded to drag a reluctant looking Ron to the front with a 'we'll see you later Harry,' thrown over her shoulder.

Ginny then took her leave, meeting up with her friends from her year. Harry just stared at her slightly surprised while standing alone in the passageway. It had completely slipped his mind that Ginny was a year below him and had friends of her own. Shaking his head he made his way to the compartment he had found earlier, making sure that nobody saw how irritated he was becoming at the staring.

And indeed people were staring at him. Although it was different this time since most people did not recognise him at first glance. Though it did not take them long to recognise him. Harry quickly made his way into the compartment all the while trying to ignore the dreamy stares the girls were sending his way, bumping into Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood on the way.

'Neville, Luna! How's tricks?' said Harry, a broad grin on his face greeting them as he led them into his compartment.

'Hey Harry,' said Neville shaking hands with him. 'You've grown,' he said as he noted the sudden height difference between the two.

'Yeah, about time if you ask me,' replied Harry. Sitting down he asked them how their summers had been. To this Neville eagerly showed him the new wand his grandmother had bought him to replace the old one that belonged to his father and had recently broken in the ministry just a few scant months back. Harry couldn't believe that it had been such a short time back. It certainly felt like a lifetime away.

'Hi Luna, how are you?'

'I'm fine thank you very much,' said Luna

'Hey, what happened to your glasses Harry?' Neville asked his friend. This question was followed by a harrowing tale that left the shy pureblood questioning his friend's sanity.

As Neville tried to digest that and not throw up, he heard giggling coming from Luna. Turning around and watching her, he hoped that she had found something funny in the issue of the Quibbler that she was reading. The alternative was too scary to think about.

'The Quibbler going strong then?' said Harry as he noticed the paper the girl was holding. He had developed a fondness for the magazine ever since it had supported him the previous year.

'Oh yes, circulation's gone up,' said Luna happily behind a pair of psychedelic glasses that she had just put on that judging by the cover of the magazine were a pair of spectraspecs and had come with that issue of the Quibbler.

Just then Neville was distracted as Trevor made his customary bid for freedom. 'Oi, come back here Trevor!' he said as he dived under the seats in order to retrieve his toad.

As Neville was busy retrieving his toad, Luna inquired about the DA. Harry did not see it continuing this year as they no longer had Umbridge. Upon mentioning Umbridge, Neville popped back up wondering about what had really happened to the woman. He had seen her a few weeks back, mumbling to herself when he had gone to visit his parents. Harry fought to keep a silly grin from appearing on his face.

'It's too bad that you aren't continuing the DA this year Harry,' said Neville disappointed getting back to the topic. 'I learnt loads thanks to you!'

Harry blushed slightly at this, 'I didn't do much Neville. You had the talent. All you needed was some help to bring it out.' He said earnestly.

'That may be true, but I think you sell yourself short mate. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have got an O in my O.W.L.s. Now if you don't mind, I need to get Trevor back' with that Neville disappeared back under the seat.

'I liked the DA, it was like having friends,' said Luna serenely.

This was one of those uncomfortable things Luna said that had Harry feeling a mixture of embarrassment and pity. Before he could respond however, there was a disturbance outside the door that turned out to be a bunch of fourth-year girls giggling loudly and whispering to each other.

Eventually they had reached a decision as a bold-looking girl with large dark eyes and a prominent chin declared loudly, 'I'll do it,' and entered the compartment.

'Hi Harry,' she said loudly. 'I'm Romilda, Romilda Vane. Why don't you join us in our compartment? You don't have to sit with them,' she said the last in a stage whisper, indicating Neville's bottom that was sticking out from under the seat and at Luna who was looking like a rather demented owl wearing her spectrascopes.

Harry gave a lazy look at Romilda and her giggling band of girls who blushed at his gaze and made a show of regarding Neville who had emerged out from the seat and Luna who was looking at the whole thing serenely before speaking.

'Why don't I have to sit with them?' he asked Romilda. 'Here,' he gestured at Neville with a wide sweeping motion of his hand, 'is the bloke who looked at Bellatrix Lestrange, Voldemort's most feared Death Eater in the eye, and spat in her face! And that was after she cast the Cruciatus Curse on him! Hell, he didn't even make a sound when she cast the Unforgivable on him! And that,' he gestured at Luna with the same sweeping motions looking very much like an actor in a courtroom drama, 'is a girl who fought Jugson, Dolohov, the three Lestranges, Nott, Crabbe, Rookwood, Mulciber, Avery, Macnair and Lucius Malfoy, and came out of the whole thing without even a scratch! Why wouldn't I want to hang out with them? Hell, the question you should be asking is, "why are they sitting with me?"' Harry finished with a flourish, deliberately not looking at Neville's face as it got redder and redder.

'Oh I don't know Harry,' said Neville wryly regaining his composure. 'It may have something with you being the guy who not only faced all of those people, but also the person whom they follow as well.'

'I guess you have a point there,' said Harry pretending to think about it.

'Um, I think we should be going now,' said a slightly dazed Romilda Vane. She and the other girls made a hasty retreat, not before the other girls gave both the boys an awed look.

As soon as the door closed behind the last giggling girl, Harry burst out laughing. 'That was brilliant mate!' he said to Neville.

Neville on the other hand was looking rather shocked with himself. 'I-I can't believe I said all that,' he said in wonder, obviously surprised at his sudden bout of confidence.

'Well, I do believe you said it. I was there, I heard it,' said Harry. 'You just have to believe in yourself Neville. You have the potential. You did face down a dozen Death Eaters after all.' Neville turned pink at the praise, clearly not used to it.

'Yes, but I don't remember looking Bellatrix in the eye and spitting in her face.' He said slowly.

'Yeah, that was bound to happen; you always did have a dodgy memory.' Harry quipped, smiling to take the sting out of his words. 'It must have been the Cruciatus curse she cast on you that made you forget.'

Neville smiled weakly at the joke, 'I also distinctly remember screaming my head off when she put that curse on me. It hurt that curse.' His body winced in remembered pain, 'I don't want to feel that again!'

'Details, details,' said Harry dismissively. 'I know that you screamed you know that you screamed, and so do Bellatrix and the other Death Eaters, but they don't. Well, Luna knows too now, but she's too nice to say otherwise, aren't you Luna?'

'Of course Harry!' said Luna sounding slightly excited at being included in things.

'There you go! Seeing as I'm the only credible witness and Bellatrix and the Death Eaters aren't going to be talking, people will have to believe me! After all, they know that I have been telling the truth for a whole year.'

Harry's words had Neville shaking his head and chuckling, 'You've changed a lot Harry, in a good way I think. It definitely beats the moody, specky git of last year.'

'I aim to please,' said Harry with a smirk. He considered saying a bit more, but decided against it. He didn't know Neville that long to get all deep and emotional. He didn't even do that with Ron. Then again, Ron did have the emotional range of a teaspoon. Instead, Harry changed the topic to the O.W.L.s which carried the conversation along.

Neville was wondering about his chances of making it into N.E.W.T. Transfiguration with his current scores when Ron and Hermione entered the compartment looking rather tired.

From what he could glean from them, it seemed that the prefects were going to be getting more responsibility due to the threat now represented by Lord Voldemort. Listening to the added responsibilities that the prefects had, Harry did not envy Ron and Hermione. He was glad that he wasn't a prefect, since it seemed that they now had their work cut out for them.

Looking out of the window Harry idly observed the weather outside. It was rather spotty today, being mainly cloudy with a hint of rain while the sun making a brief appearance now and then. He would be having a rather busy year this time. He would need to explore the Chamber of Secrets and hopefully find out what Salazar Slytherin had left his descendants. If the basilisk was in a decent enough condition, he also would need to see to rendering it into potions ingredients, to sell or perhaps use for himself. Also on his list of things to do was to find a way to get that sword from Dumbledore's office. He doubted the headmaster would just give it to him and didn't want to ask in case it made the man put up more security around the artefact. Asking would also lead to questions that Harry did not want to answer at this point.

Another long term goal was getting to know Daphne better. Harry grimaced at this; the girl was amusing, but pretty frosty. Though he had faced Voldemort, a Hungarian Horntail, a thousand year old basilisk and more importantly survived a relationship with Cho Chang. Daphne couldn't be any worse.

He was brought out of his thoughts by a timid knock on the door. Ron opened the door to reveal a nervous looking third year girl. Harry mentally sighed oh great, another fan girl wanting the "Chosen One" to sit with her, he thought.

'Yes, how may we help you?' Hermione asked the intimidated girl kindly.

'I have a note for Neville Longbottom and Harry P-Potter from Professor Slughorn,' said the girl nervously stuttering out Harry's name as she looked at him.

Harry took his note from her and thanked the girl, using her name which he found out via Legilimency, causing her to blush deeply before scurrying away at top speed. Shaking his head in silent amusement, he gave Neville his note and opened his to read.

'What does it say?' came Ron's voice suddenly, as he leaned forward in an attempt to read the letter in Harry's hands.

Harry immediately jerked away from Ron and fixed the redhead with a glare, irritated with his interference.

Before the situation could become tense, Neville interjected in a nervous and slightly perplexed voice, 'Who is Professor Slughorn, and what does he want me for?' Engrossed in the letter he completely missed the glare Harry had sent Ron for poking his nose in.

'New teacher,' said Harry shrugging. 'I guess we have to go since he did call us.'

With that, Harry and Neville rose and saying their goodbyes left for compartment C.

Entering it, Harry saw that he and Neville weren't the only guests, though if Slughorn's greeting was anything to go by, Harry was the most anticipated. There were two seventh years one of whom Harry was sure was in his house, a brief mental scan told Harry their names, though one of them, Cormac McLaggen had decent defences. Harry barely escaped notice from them; fortunately Cormac wasn't good at pinpointing passive Legilimency. Along with that were Susan Bones and a tall black boy in Harry's year with long

slanting eyes. Harry also spied Ginny Weasley who had an expression on her face that gave the impression that she was still trying to figure out how she had ended up in the compartment to begin with.

'Harry! How are you?' said Susan.

'Susan,' Harry smiled warmly. 'I hope you're well?'

Harry sat down in the closest available space next to Susan while Neville sat down opposite him next to the tall dark skinned Slytherin boy who Harry remembered was called Blaise Zabini.

As he had the delicious food that Slughorn had procured for this little soiree, Harry watched his peers interact with Slughorn with fascination; as he had suspected, the people seated around him all were related in some form or another to someone influential whom Slughorn invariably knew. Harry quickly came to the realisation that most of the time it was what was unsaid that had more significance than what was said as he noted how Slughorn subtly let it be known that Marcus Belby wasn't that important to him after finding out that he wasn't that close to his uncle. Harry privately thought that it was a bit stupid of Belby to have said outright that he had no contact with his uncle. Harry found himself thinking that were he in Belby's place, he would have probably been vague enough to insinuate a relationship instead of being so ... blunt. Though perhaps Belby's honesty would have prevented a complication in the future? Harry really wasn't sure...

McLaggen was mildly interesting since he seemed to be rather close to the head of the Aurors and what sounded like two other important sounding wizards. That explained his rudimentary proficiency with Occlumency. Zabini on the other hand really made Harry nervous. From what Harry had heard, his mother was either really unfortunate, really lucky, or as he suspected, quite well versed in arranging accidental deaths. He had no idea what she had taught her son, and hoped he wouldn't have to find out the hard way.

Harry was careful to keep his expression blank as Slughorn commented about the failed attack on Amelia Bones when he was talking to Susan while fishing for information about the mysterious informant that had tipped off the minister. Although his sources were clearly good since he somehow knew that Susan was the one who

had obtained that information in the first place. Susan however, remained tight-lipped about the whole thing.

After what could be arguably counted as the most uncomfortable ten minutes of Neville's life, it was finally Harry's turn. Slughorn took a minute to eye Harry as if he were a particularly succulent piece of pheasant before beginning a three minute monologue on Harry's life gaining the attention of all the other occupants in the room with the exception of Ginny and Neville. Harry listened to that without comment; he was more than content to let his achievements do the talking for him. Besides, there really wasn't much to say.

When Ginny had opened her mouth to make a really scathing comment towards Zabini, Harry found out that not all of those gathered were selected for their relations. Apparently Slughorn had caught Ginny pasting another student with a Bat Bogey Hex by the sound of it, and had been suitably impressed. It gave Harry some hope; Slughorn certainly could recognise talent and power when he saw it. Of course, the new professor was more impressed with Ginny and Neville after he had found out that they were also involved in that fiasco in the Ministry.

The afternoon wore on with Slughorn giving anecdote after anecdote about the different people he had influenced, taught or knew well. The professor only stopped when he noticed that it had become rather late. Bidding everyone a goodbye, he sent them off with invitations to come around sometime whenever they felt like it. Belby, predictably, didn't get one.

As they exited, Zabini gave Harry a filthy look that Harry returned in earnest unconsciously making his eyes flash an intense green, unnerving the Slytherin. Turning his head away in an obvious dismissal and not noticing how he had startled the Slytherin, Harry asked Ginny, 'So, how did you end up there?'

'He saw me hex Zacharias Smith, you know that idiot from Hufflepuff in the DA last year? He as annoying me and kept on and on asking about what happened at the Ministry till he annoyed me so much I hexed him,' explained Ginny. 'That's when Slughorn came in. I thought I was going to be put in detention but got invited to lunch instead.'

Ginny parted ways leaving Harry, Susan and Neville to make their way to their respective compartments which they spent in idle chitchat.

Half an hour later, the students hopped off the train as it reached Hogsmeade station. Spotting Hagrid, who by then had all the nervous first-years gathered around him like a swarm of flies around an elephant, Harry made his way towards the first person who had revealed to him the world where he truly belonged.

'Hey Hagrid, how are you?' he called out. Noticing that the half giant seemed distracted, Harry got closer to him and asked, 'what's wrong?'

'Harry! Glad yer came! Listen, I have a favour to ask of yeh,' while saying this, Hagrid looked anxiously towards the forest.

Noticing where he was looking, Harry became nervous, 'Um I don't think I can help you here Hagrid right now ... what with the feast and all ... besides the forest is forbidden and after last year, I doubt that the centaurs like me anymore ... perhaps in the morning?' going in the forest was bad enough. Going at night by himself and completely alone was downright stupid to the point of being suicidal. Memories of Aragog and his merry family of giant spiders came vividly to Harry's mind.

'Oh I don't want yer to go in teh forest Harry!' Hagrid chuckled nonchalantly, 'Nah, I want teh ask somethin' else.'

Harry didn't know whether to feel relieved or worried at this. Hagrid may not want him to go to the forest, but that didn't mean that it would be completely safe. So it was with a lot of trepidation that Harry asked, 'What is it?'

'Well,' said Hagrid, as he scratched his beard nervously. 'I have summat to do in teh forest. Only I have ter get this lot 'ere across teh lake and ter Pr'fessor McGonagall.' he indicated the first-years that were too busy looking around and being nervous to focus on what the big frightening hairy man was saying. 'So I was wondering if yeh didn't mind doing that.'

It took some time for that to sink into Harry's mind, 'What? You mean take the Firsties across the lake and to McGonagall?' he

asked incredulously. Suddenly, the Forest didn't seem so bad after all.

'Eh, yeah, so yeh'll do it?' asked Hagrid hopefully, completely missing the incredulity in Harry's tone.

'Why not ask a prefect? After all, aren't they supposed to be doing that?'

'Well, yeah, bu' yer a captain now Harry! Tha' should be good enough. 'Sides, we're teh on'y ones left 'ere' said Hagrid, indicating the now empty platform to a rather surprised Harry.

Harry saw the last carriage trundle off in resignation and a bit of irritation, couldn't his friends at least have waited. Unless he wanted to walk to the castle, or volunteer to go to the forest, he really didn't have much of a choice now. 'Fine Hagrid,' he said as he eyed the first-years warily. The stories he had been told about them from Ron last year hadn't really appealed them to him. Then again, he had faced down Basilisks, Dragons, Dementors, Death Eaters and Voldemort himself. A bunch of tetchy snot nosed little moppets should be easy.

'Good man Harry!' said Hagrid as he patted Harry on the back making the teen stumble a few steps forward. The half-giant then quickly headed towards the trees that marked the beginning of the Forbidden Forest, leaving Harry alone with a bunch of nervous and slightly curious eleven year olds.

Harry sized up the first-years in front of him. There was no way he was that small at eleven! The little buggers were positively tiny! He was sure that a few of them were actually nine and had faked their age to get in earlier.

'Alright you lot, settle down,' said Harry taking charge quieting the first-years. Seeing that he had their attention, he cleared his throat and continued, 'Right, so since Hagrid won't be able to take you to the school, he has asked me to do so instead. My name is Harry Potter by the way.' Hearing the gasps and whispers among some of the students, he rolled his eyes in exasperation and irritably said, 'Yes, yes, I'm the Harry Potter, I have the scar, and I defeated Voldemort when I was a baby. I also am here to take you to the castle, so if you'd stop gawking, we could move on.'

Immediately a hand was raised, 'Please sir, how will we be going to Hogwarts?' asked a little girl who Harry was sure was actually nine.

'First and foremost, it's just Harry. Not "Sir" or "Mr. Potter".' said an amused Harry the little buggers can be rather cute, he thought. 'And secondly,' his eyes narrowed as he looked at the snobbish looking boy next to the girl, 'nobody is expected to swim the lake, and if you don't watch your mouth, you will be the one swimming it!' He had heard what the brat had told her and was not amused by it.

The kid immediately shut up, though he was looking rather mutinous. Hearing the muttered 'I'll tell,' Harry replied, 'Go ahead. I'd love to tell Professor McGonagall what you told her.'

'Father says that Professor McGonagall is all bark and no bite.' The kid shot back with a tone that reminded Harry of Draco Malfoy.

'Is that so?' Harry crouched down to the kid's level. 'Well then I have a funny story to tell you.' he said conversationally, 'you see, in my fourth year, I saw Professor McGonagall turn a ferret back into a student. Now the funny thing is that same student was being bounced up and down the hallways before being turned back. I'm sure Professor McGonagall would love to hear about your opinion of her. I believe that she is rather partial to cats. Maybe, just maybe, if she is in a good mood, she might turn you into a white fluffy little kitten and give you to the girls to play with. Who knows, they might even tie a bow on your head and put you in a cute little dress! You'd love that won't you?'

Harry smirked as he saw the snot's face turn white. Satisfied he had cowed him, he addressed the whole group, 'Now come on, follow me.' Turning around, he saw that it was rather dark. A quick glance at the first-years revealed that they were beginning to get scared with the darkness surrounding them. Either that or they were still scared witless of Professor McGonagall.

Deciding to break the tension, Harry told them all to take their wands out and taught them the Lumos spell. He smiled at the look of delight on their faces as they all managed their first piece of magic. Turning around Harry pointed his wand at his hand and not thinking of any happy memories, silently cast 'Expecto Patronum.' Harry had read about the Patronus charm in the summer and the book had

also explained the other uses of a Patronus. It could be used to send private messages almost instantly, and in addition to that, when cast on the palm without any happy memories to fuel it, the Patronus engulfed the hand in the form of ethereal, heatless, silvery flames which could be used as a light. Harry remembered seeing Remus use it before in the Hogwarts Express in third year and wished that his father's friend had thought to teach him that as well. It looked pretty brill. The first-years definitely seemed to agree as they gave little gasps of awe.

Smirking Harry led them down the path and to the lake. Even though he had gone to Hogwarts for five years now and was starting his penultimate year here, the sight of the old majestic castle perched upon the cliff still moved him the same way it had when he had first seen it in his first year. Harry fully appreciated the reason why the first-years were taken through the lake. The view was pretty stunning.

By the time he had all the little snots in their boats with their wands extinguished, Harry was violently cursing Hagrid under his breath and wondering how on earth he ended up in these situations. First, the man made him a smuggler what with the illegal dragon that he had to get rid of. Then, if that wasn't enough, he was then pressed into service as the man's assistant as he hunted for a creature smart enough, fast enough and evil enough to kill unicorns in the dead of the night in the Forbidden Forest who turned out to be the most evil Dark Lord of modern magical history. All because he was caught after having smuggled said dragon. You'd think Hagrid would have been a bit more appreciative of that and let them off easy? Though, knowing him, the man probably thought the whole thing was a treat.

Then in second year, he had to be the man's investigative journalist and socialise with his "friends" who happened to be a colony of giant hairy man eating spiders. It was a good thing he didn't have to actually babysit and teach Hagrid's "little" brother English under Umbridge's nose (he had already done the "mercenary teacher" bit with the DA). Now he had a bunch of little hellions to manage. By the time they had reached the boats, some of the little snots had managed to regain their courage and were chattering away, asking Harry all sorts of questions about himself, driving him spare with their high pitched voices. Eventually Harry had to threaten to feed the nosiest one to the giant squid to get the tetchy little buggers to shut up.

It took a few minutes for Harry to work the boats, since Hagrid had forgotten to tell him how to work them. Harry really was thankful that he had a boat to himself. Otherwise, the school would have four less students, since he would be on his way to Azkaban for having murdered three first-years. Some of them especially were rather mouthy. One in particular just wouldn't shut up, reminding Harry of Colin Creevey and his brother Dennis. He was silently thankful of the boy next to him who had kept him in conversation throughout the whole boat trip.

Leading them to the front doors, Harry knocked as hard as he could on the oak front doors, figuring that it was a part of tradition as well.

'You are rather late Hagrid, I was ...' Professor McGonagall trailed off as she saw not Hagrid standing in front of her as expected when she opened the door, but Harry Potter. 'Mr. Potter?' she asked, slightly surprised at seeing him there.

'The first-years, Professor McGonagall,' Harry said drily, indicating said first-years that were clustered behind him thoroughly enjoying the look of stunned disbelief on her face. Minerva wasn't sure, but she thought she had heard a few gasps from the first-years when her name was mentioned.

'Where's Hagrid, Mr. Potter?' she asked.

'Well Professor, Hagrid had a matter to attend to in the forest, so he decided to have me take them,' said Harry brightly. Minerva just sighed in response, That man, she thought. Quickly regaining her posture, she said briskly, 'thank you Mr. Potter. Ten points to Gryffindor for helping out around the school. Now hurry along. I'll take it from here.' She did not notice the worried looks that the first-years were giving her or the slightly pleading ones that were sent to Harry almost begging him to stay with them.

Leading them into the antechamber, she gave them her standard lecture about the houses and the point system. Absently noting that this seemed to be the most polite and quiet batch of new first-years, she left to get the sorting hat.

Before Harry walked into the packed Great Hall, he activated his necklace which gave him enough time to walk to the Gryffindor table

and sit with his friends before he was noticed. He was halfway there when Ron, who was the first one to notice him missing and was anxiously searching for Harry, was the first to break through the charm and see Harry walking towards them.

In his relief, he blurted out rather loudly, 'Bloody hell Harry! Where were you?' That immediately got the attention of everyone else in the vicinity, fully deactivating the charm on the necklace for the moment.

Not breaking stride, Harry just smiled and said, 'I took the scenic route Ron.' Sitting down next to Ron, he softly told his two friends why he had taken that long.

Ron just winced in sympathy and said, 'Better you than me mate. I have enough of taking care of those midgets to want to bring them across the lake.'

'Well, I think that it was rather responsible of you Harry,' said Hermione giving Ron a glare. Before the red head could retort, Professor McGonagall entered with the first-years saving Harry along with the rest of the nearby Gryffindors from a rousing round of yet another of their arguments.

Harry barely listened to the Sorting Hat's song. Just like last year, it called out for unity between all four houses and warned of dark times approaching and Harry found his attention wandering towards other things. He soon realised that many at his table and at the other house tables were either blatantly or discreetly staring at him. Most of them were girls who were giving him rather dreamy looks. Harry just looked back with a casual smile on his face, occasionally winking at the more blatant ones. Seeing them blush and turn away, he snorted to himself. This was definitely more effective than his usual tactic of trying to ignore them. Who knows, he might get in some of their knickers if he played his cards right.

'Evans, Mark,' McGonagall's voice drifted in bringing Harry out of his musing. Harry looked on as the kid who seemed to be rather close to the one Harry had dubbed Colin II on the boat come up and put the hat on his head. That name sounded rather familiar...

'GRYFFINDOR!' shouted the hat. Harry clapped with the others as Mark Evans made his way over and sat ... right next to Colin II. Harry silently cursed. Just what I need, he thought.

As the sorting drew to a close, Harry waited impatiently for Dumbledore to start the feast. Judging by the sounds coming from Ron's stomach, he wasn't the only one. 'There is a time for words, and this is not it,' said Dumbledore, and as he sat down, the food appeared on the table.

'We seemed to have a rather large batch of new Gryffindors this year,' Nearly Headless Nick commented from across the table and next to Neville. 'In fact I think that Gryffindor has taken a majority of the first-years.'

Harry swallowed his food and looked over to where the first-years were sitting. Sure enough there were quite a few of the moppets sitting there. Shrugging, Harry returned back to his food. A few minutes later he noticed Hagrid slip into the Great Hall and sit beside Professor McGonagall. Harry grinned at him as Hagrid waved while McGonagall gave the half giant a disapproving look. Hagrid really was in for it the minute he was alone with McGonagall. Of that Harry was sure.

As soon as the feast was over, Dumbledore stood up and spread his arms wide as he greeted the students, almost immediately drawing attention of all present to his blackened hand.

'What happened to his hand?' said Hermione slightly nauseated as Dumbledore calmly covered the appendage with his sleeve and airily brush the injury aside as whispers broke out throughout the hall.

'It was like that when I saw him last,' Harry whispered back as Dumbledore let it be known that Filch definitely did keep up with times as far as joke items were concerned. 'I thought he'd have had it cured by now.'

'It looks as if it's died ... and there are some injuries that you can't cure ... old curses, poisons without antidotes...' Hermione trailed off as Dumbledore mentioned the Quidditch teams as well as the need for a new captain.

'... We are pleased to welcome a new member of staff, Horace Slughorn' said Dumbledore as Slughorn stood up. 'He has graciously agreed to resume his old post of Potions master.'

This caused quite a stir as all the students started whispering among themselves. Ron and Hermione turned to Harry, 'but I thought-'

'Professor Snape meanwhile,' said Dumbledore, raising his voice to be able to be heard above the muttering, 'will be taking over the position of Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher.'

Harry couldn't believe his ears. It took a lot of self control for him not to shout out loud at this announcement.

'But you said that Slughorn was going to be the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher,' said Hermione.

'Well I assumed as much. How am I supposed to know what he was the Potions master before leaving the last time?' said Harry realising that Dumbledore hadn't said anything about the subject Slughorn was going to teach. Really, the man could have mentioned it to Harry since he did use him to get Slughorn to teach in the first place.

'At least there is one good thing about Snape being the Defence teacher,' said Harry as he glared with a burning hatred at the look of triumph on Snape's face as he lazily acknowledged the applause at the Slytherin table with a wave of his hand, not bothering to stand up.

'What's that?' asked Ron.

'The position is jinxed, so Snape's going to be out by the end of the year,' said Harry with a smirk. 'Personally I am hoping for a nice long drawn out death.' He added viciously, gaining a look of reproach from Hermione. Were a member of the Black family present at that time, they would have commented that Harry looked a lot like Orion Black when he was about to do something really nasty, which in the case of the late and unlamented Orion Black was almost all the time. As it is, Hermione got a vague reminder of a portrait of someone she had seen once in Grimmauld Place.

Harry barely paid any attention to the rest of Dumbledore's speech as he was still daydreaming about the different ways Snape would be ousted from the job. Perhaps it would be something

embarrassing? Harry felt fate owed him enough to grant him a nice laugh at the greasy haired git's expense.

Shaking his head to clear it of macabre thoughts of Snape dying, Harry rose from his seat along with the other students as Dumbledore dismissed everyone.

Almost immediately the new Gryffindor students were in front of him looking at him expectantly. Harry regarded them in amusement, 'How may I help you?' he asked them. It felt good to tower over people for a change.

'Um, we were wondering where the Gryffindor dorm is,' said the same nervous girl who had first asked him a question.

'Ah, well, why don't you go talk to Hermione and Ron over there? See that bushy headed girl and the slightly clueless ginger?' he pointed to his friends, 'they will be more than happy to help.'

'Why can't you take us there?' asked the boy who was forever going to be known as Colin II in Harry's mind in a rather plaintive tone.

'Well, you see Colin, they along with two other fifth-years are the Gryffindor prefects so it is their happy duty to escort you there,' said Harry realising at the last minute that he had inadvertently slipped out the name he had given the boy.

'It's "Callan"' said the boy in a slightly resigned tone.

'Right,' said Harry. Yeah definitely going to be Colin, he thought. 'Anyway, it's the prefects' job to lead you to the dorms. And here they come.' He said with relief as the two fifth year prefects came up to them. He looked around for Ron and Hermione, but they had suddenly disappeared.

'But we want you to!' whined another girl

Harry was completely nonplussed at this. He distinctly remembered threatening to feed one of them to the giant squid. He thought that would've been enough to keep them far away from him.

'Yes well, I don't know the password luv,' Harry told the little girl. 'You would get there faster if you went with these two.' He indicated the two fifth year prefects.

'The password's "Lion's Pride",' said one of the prefects helpfully before they sloped off quickly.

'You're a load of help Eastchurch,' said Harry sarcastically to the girl's back. Looking at the expectant faces of the first-years, he sighed, 'Fine, follow me.'

Immediately the first-years got in line eagerly chattering away. Harry led them up to the Gryffindor dormitory muttering under his breath. He might as well be made a prefect, what with the duties he was being made to do. So far all the Gryffindor prefects seemed rather negligent in their duties. Harry had seen the seventh year prefects head to the dormitories almost immediately towards the dorms, Ron and Hermione also had disappeared. Something he really found odd, considering that Hermione was pretty uptight about rules and her prefect duties.

Harry decided to be helpful and pointed out the different landmarks and obstacles along the way. Thankfully Peeves wasn't around this time and their journey went by uninterrupted.

Directing the girls to their dorms, Harry followed the boys up their section and getting to his dorm room, undressed and went to sleep, silently vowing that it would be the last time he would be doing work for the prefects. The next time they wanted any help, they would have to pay him.

Yes, another chapter ... do contain your enthusiasm ... screaming at the top of your lungs is acceptable, but that is where I draw the line.

by the way, it hasn't been looked through by my betas since they seem to be rather busy ... sorry guys, I waited...

I'll probably get it replaced with the beta version when they send it...

Harry woke up early the next morning as per his usual time. Getting dressed, he quietly made his way out of the dorm and to the grounds. Once outside, he jogged towards the Quidditch pitch where he did a few laps. Checking the time and finding out that it was still early enough, he went back into the castle and to the seventh floor. Pacing three times in front of the portrait of Barnabas the Barmy, he opened the door that appeared and entered the room.

The room he entered in was large with a padded floor. The room that he had used before to train in before leaving for the summer had changed. One side of the room was what could only be a firing range with a series of targets. Upon inspecting the targets, Harry found that they could be charmed to move around in random directions at different speeds. Opposite the bookshelf that was there the last time, stood a punch-back next to the dummies that Harry had practised on a few months back. Stepping back to the centre of the room and observing the changes, Harry nodded to himself in satisfaction. The additions would be useful. Not wasting any more time, he got started on his workout. The padded floor definitely was better to do push-ups on than the rough ground he was used to so far. For one, there weren't any small stones that would always find themselves underneath his knuckles, severely cutting down the number of push-ups he could do in a set.

Finished with that part of his routine, Harry went to the firing range. After playing with the settings a bit, Harry found that the rabbits and gnomes he had practised on in the summer were as good as an intermediate setting on the range.

A quick glance at his watch showed that he needed to get ready for class. Concentrating on a bathroom, Harry called Randolph, now his personal elf (mainly due to his seniority, much to Dobby's displeasure) and instructed the elf to get his bath things as well as his uniform. As the elf popped back in with the mentioned items, Harry reflected, not for the first time, that it was good to have help. And it was even better to have help that loves to work. Thanking the elf (who accepted with good grace, reminding Harry of the other advantage of selecting him as his personal elf) Harry got bathed and, now in his uniform, made his way to the dormitory.

Whistling merrily, he entered the sixth-year dorm. Ron groaned sleepily as he got up. 'Bloody hell mate, pipe down! There's no need

to make so much of noise so early!' he said while Dean nodded silently as Seamus gave Harry a dirty look.

'Maybe you should also get up early too Ron,' said Harry cheerfully. 'Then go running for a bit. That way, you wouldn't be so grumpy in the mornings. Besides, it's nearly half past seven, it isn't that early!'

Harry chuckled as the other boys slowly made their way to the bathroom to get ready for the day. Harry left his dirty clothes on the floor as he knew that the house-elves would later pick them up to launder them. Having nothing to do, he left for the Great Hall on his own for breakfast.

As it was still early, the Hall was mostly empty with only the teachers filling up the staff table slowly sipping cups of tea. Most of the students present were Ravenclaws with a few Hufflepuffs and Slytherins. Spotting Hannah Abbot and not wanting to sit by alone with a bunch of third-year Gryffindors for company, Harry made his way to the Hufflepuff table.

'Mind if I join in?' he asked Hannah.

The girl squeaked before turning around, 'Harry! How are you? Sure no problem, you can sit here,' she said as she indicated to the empty spot next to her, letting Harry there.

Sitting down, Harry noted Susan looking still sleepy. 'Good morning Susan!' chirped Harry cheerfully, getting a growl and a filthy look from the still sleepy witch.

Hannah giggled softly and said, 'my, you're rather cheerful this morning.' Leaning in closer she whispered, 'don't mind Susan, she takes a while to wake up. Till then we have this troll in front of us who is probably going to eat you if you annoy her too much.'

'Oh, it's the workout I guess. Nothing wakes a person up better than a nice run outside on a crisp and clear September morning in Scotland. You should try it sometime,' leaning in to whisper just as she did, he said, 'I'll keep that in mind.'

'I think I'll pass on that,' said Hannah. 'I don't fancy running out in the cold, thank you.'

'Your loss,' said Harry in reply. 'It really does help a lot though.'

'Not that I don't admire the effect it has on your body,' said Hannah clearly thinking about the last time she had seen Harry in Diagon Alley. Those Muggle clothes showcased his body better than the robes he was currently wearing. Looking at his face a bit closer, she noticed a few features that she hadn't before. She supposed that it was because she had all the time in the world.

'Is that an invitation Ms. Abbott?' asked Harry teasingly, smiling as he saw Hannah blush.

Hannah hurriedly changed the topic, 'So what can we Hufflepuffs do for the great and mighty Harry Potter today? You don't have any more earth shattering news or dire warning for us do you?' she asked in concern at the end.

'Yes, actually, I do have a "dire warning" as you say, for you,' said Harry mock seriously. Leaning in he whispered dramatically, 'we have classes today!'

'Oh you!' Hannah slapped a laughing Harry on the shoulder. 'Seriously, why are you here Harry? Not that I mind,' she added hastily, 'but you normally don't socialise with others. I mean, even Zabini comes here time to time and talks to Ernie Macmillan.'

'Well, I did have my various issues in the last few years,' said Harry shrugging. 'Now I am mostly over them, so I thought that it would be nice to make some more friends.'

'Well, I don't mind that at all,' said Hannah nicely.

The two continued talking of inconsequential things with Susan joining them later on. By the time McGonagall stood up to hand out the schedules, requiring them to go to their house tables, Harry found himself bidding goodbye to a group of his year mates which included Ernie Macmillan, Justin Finch-Fletchley, and Terry Boot. He even nodded to Blaise Zabini, who actually nodded back.

Making his way back to the Gryffindor table, Harry met with Hermione and a finally awake Ron.

'Where were you Harry,' Ron all but demanded. 'We've been looking for you mate.'

'I could ask you the same question about last night,' Harry countered. 'Where did you disappear off to last night? I had to do your job for you since you weren't around to escort the first-years to their dorms.'

'I didn't know you knew Susan very well,' said Hermione before Ron could answer.

'We did meet up before,' said Harry casually.

By the time he realised the slipup, Hermione was already drawing conclusions, 'That would mean ... Harry! You didn't go to Diagon Alley by yourself before, did you?' she said looking at him menacingly.

'So what if I did?' Harry said slightly defiantly.

'It. Is. Not. Safe!' said Hermione pausing at each word. 'Anything could have happened to you there! I cannot believe Dumbledore let you go there!'

'What does Dumbledore have to do with anything?' asked Harry curiously.

'You mean to tell me that you went there without Dumbledore's permission?' asked Hermione sounding very disapproving.

'And why would I need to get his permission?'

'Dumbledore is the greatest wizard of modern times,' said Hermione. 'It matters because he knows what is best, and if he does not approve-'

'He's the headmaster.' Cut in Harry sharply, 'I do not see why I have to ask him for permission. School was not in session during the summer, so I fail to see why what he says in the summer matters. He is not my guardian. Besides, he didn't expressly tell me to stay in Privet Drive either.'

Hermione bristled at this and was about to open her mouth again when Harry cut her off again by greeting Professor McGonagall who

had just finished talking to Neville who had an odd look of delighted incredulity on his face.

'Ah Mr. Potter, let's see now ... Potter ... here we are ... well, you have obtained the necessary scores to attend all the classes you have signed up for. I was rather impressed by your Transfiguration score by the way. Now I have noticed that you haven't signed up for Potions class? You had expressed a desire to become an Auror. You will need a Potions N.E.W.T. to get accepted in.'

'But I thought that you needed an O in the Potions O.W.L.s to be accepted in for the Potions N.E.W.T., Professor,' said Harry.

'Yes, that was a requirement put down by Professor Snape. However, Professor Slughorn has decided to lower the requirement to an E,' said Professor McGonagall. 'So shall I put your name down for the Potions N.E.W.T. class?' she inquired expectantly.

Harry looked at her expectant face. On one hand, he really no longer wanted to go for Potions since Snape had more than put him off the subject for life. Besides, Potions making was for minions! Harry shook his head at that, where had that last thought come from?

Looking back to Professor McGonagall, he gave his consent. Being in the class might help him in the long run. Slughorn sounded like a better teacher, and by the looks of it, might give Harry the same treatment Snape used to give his Slytherins. Besides, the man was also well connected, something Snape was not. Being in Slughorn's class and endearing himself to the rotund man might help Harry out a lot. Though he couldn't help but feel that the subject was somehow beneath him.

'Very well Mr. Potter, I am sure that Professor Slughorn will be willing to lend you the materials. Now I also received your note about those two other classes. Now while we don't recommend it, we do allow students to pursue O.W.L.s in other electives, those classes normally take place on Saturday mornings. You will be paired with other sixth years and those who need extra tutoring. Is that acceptable to you?' seeing him nod, she continued, 'In that case, here is your timetable. Oh, by the way, twenty hopefuls have put their names forward for the Gryffindor Quidditch team tryouts. I shall hand over the list to you and you can set a schedule at your leisure.'

In a few minutes time, Ron was cleared to do the same N.E.W.T. classes as Harry while Hermione was as usual cleared for all the classes she had opted for.

'Look Harry!' said a delighted Ron looking at his timetable. 'We've got a free period now ... and one after break ... and one after lunch ... excellent!'

They headed up to the Gryffindor dorms while Hermione scurried off to her Ancient Runes class. There they were met by Kate.

'Hey, Harry! Wow, you've really grown,' She said looking at him appraisingly. 'Congratulations on the badge by the way. I knew you would have earned it! Tell me when you're holding the trials!'

'Oh, don't be stupid, you don't need to try out! I've seen you play for five years now!' replied Harry with a confident smile on his face.

'I wouldn't go down that route if I were you,' Katie said warningly, 'there might be someone out there better than me. Many teams have been ruined because the captains have always had the old faces or let their friends in.'

Harry nodded in acquiesce; she did have a point there. Well, it looked like he was going to have his work cut out for him.

Katie then left the common room leaving Harry and Ron. Ron had a look an uncomfortable look on his face as he played with a lime green Fanged Frisbee that Harry was sure Hermione had confiscated from someone else.

After a few minutes of silence, Ron spoke up, 'What note was McGonagall talking about Harry?'

'Huh, oh well, I had sent a note to McGonagall over the summer asking if I could take up the Ancient Runes and Arithmancy O.W.L. classes in sixth year.'

'Why would you do something so mental?' asked Ron incredulously forgetting about the Frisbee which got too close to Crookshanks, biting the cat on the tail.

Harry watched the ensuing kerfuffle between Ron and Hermione's cat with amusement, trying not to laugh as he heard the occasional vicious snarl come out from the cat and Ron's pained grunts as he tried to pry the Frisbee off the cat's tail. Crookshanks definitely took after his owner in that regard. If Harry didn't know better, he would actually go so far as to say that the cat was actually berating Ron for acting like an idiot while clawing him to ribbons. As Ron sat back down again sporting numerous scratches Harry was sure he saw a look imperious disapproval so reminiscent of Hermione coming from the offended cat before it stalked up the girls' dormitory, tail, just as bushy as her hair, held high.

'Well, at least you managed to get the Frisbee in one shape,' said Harry brightly, indicating the object in Ron's hands. Ron just made a rude hand gesture in response which only served to make Harry finally break down laughing.

'So what made you do something so mental?' asked Ron suddenly.

Harry sighed and said, 'well, the classes sound interesting, and from what Bill and Fleur taught me over the summer it isn't as hard as I first thought it to be. So I thought, "why not?" after all, it will definitely help my credentials when I go searching for a job.'

'Mate, you're the Boy-Who-Lived! People will be falling over themselves just to get the honour of saying that you work for them!' said Ron rolling his eyes.

'Maybe, but they will expect a lot from me. Unlike that pompous tosser Lockhart who did nothing but sit on his arse all day writing replies to his fan mail, and churning out autographs for one half his life while spending the other half prancing around and smiling for the drivel he had written, I actually will be doing some real work. And that will need knowledge. Something even Lockhart couldn't fake. Thus I will need to go to such classes to get the knowledge to back my image,' said Harry a little testily. While he didn't detect any malice or jealousy in Ron's voice when he had said that (an improvement if there ever was one) he was still peeved that his friend thought so little of him, or would encourage him in not achieving his best potential. Did he not see that it was through years of magical experience, study and knowledge of spells that gave Dumbledore the reputation he was currently holding? Even when painted as a delusional old fool, Dumbledore still had the same

presence and engendered the same amount of respect as before. Even Voldemort himself respected the old mage, despite his proclamations of the contrary. Harry wanted that, so he needed to start somewhere.

'Whoa calm down there mate! I was only joshing around,' said Ron trying to placate Harry. The look of bewilderment on his face told Harry that he had no idea why Harry had said what he had said.

It took all of Harry's self control not to pull his hair in frustration at his friend's obtuseness. Instead, taking a deep breath, he looked at the time and seeing that it was about time for the next class, got up to go out of the common room.

Harry regained some of his good mood by the time they reached the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom. Hermione was already queuing up outside the classroom carrying an armful of books and looking rather put-upon.

'We've got so much homework for Ancient Runes,' she complained as Harry and Ron joined her. 'I've got two translations, a fifteen inch essay and I have to read these before next class!'

'Shame,' yawned Ron.

'Oh, you just wait! I bet Snape's going to give loads,' said Hermione resentfully.

Just then the man in question opened the door and as customary for him, bade the students to enter.

Harry took in the new décor of the classroom. Cheerful, he thought sarcastically as he looked at the various macabre pictures on the walls of people in pain, suffering the effects of nasty looking curses. The dark and gloomy room that was lit by candles as the curtains were drawn suddenly reminded him of the sight enhancement ritual that he had made plans to perform before school had closed for summer.

'I have not asked you to take out your books,' said Snape softly making Hermione blush and hurriedly drop her book back into her bag. Harry snorted at this; the comment was so typical of Snape. Harry knew that Snape had said that just for her. His immaturity

really hadn't diminished one bit. Not only that, but Snape's low soft tones combined with the atmosphere he had created made Harry think of a cheesy Muggle horror film. He half expected to see a coffin stowed away at one side of the room. The way he stalked around in the shadows as he described the different pictures only served to enhance that image.

Harry listened to Snape's lecture on the Dark Arts and their defence with an outward expression of haughty boredom that was a close competitor for Malfoy's own look of arrogance. Inside his mind however, he was slightly alarmed by the loving caress that coloured Snape's voice when he was talking about the Dark Arts. Though he reasoned that he shouldn't be surprised as he observed Snape through the hair falling over his eyes; Snape was after all, a Death Eater, spy or not.

'The Dark Lord has used Inferi in the past,' said Snape to a slightly hysterical Parvati Patil, 'which means that you will be well-advised to assume he might use them again. Now ...'

He set off around the other side of the classroom towards his desk his dark robes billowing around him, as the class watched his every move as they had been doing since the beginning of his speech.

'... You are, I believe, complete novices in the use of non-verbal spells. What is the advantage of a non-verbal spell?'

Harry rolled his eyes when Hermione's hand shot to the air as usual. He did not understand why she had this obsessive need to answer every single question a teacher posed to her in a classroom. Not only that, but hadn't she learned by now that Snape did not appreciate her answering every single question? Really a moron would have understood that just by looking at the way Snape took his time surveying the class to make sure that he absolutely had no choice. On a whim, Harry lazily raised his hand halfway giving the impression that he couldn't be bothered to fully raise it. He wanted to see if Snape was desperate enough to pick him over her.

'Yes, Mr. Potter?'

'Your opponent won't know the spell coming from your wand till it is cast. It gives a split second advantage in a duel. Some spells do look similar when cast, so countering them is harder when the

incantation isn't known. Do they shield against what could be a bone breaking curse, or move out of the way of what could possibly be a blasting charm? Also, it is harder for the enemy to counter the effects of a curse one of their numbers was hit with if they don't know what the incantation was. For all practical purposes, in a battlefield, till the fight is over, that person might as well be hit by the Killing Curse since it will take time to diagnose and counter the curse. Time the enemy won't be able to afford.' Harry drawled his answer out while inwardly laughing with glee at the look on Snape's face. It was quite a sight; Snape really was desperate enough to choose Harry over Hermione! It looked like Harry had moved down Snape's list of people to hate. Though it was more likely that Hermione had moved up on the list as far as the classroom was concerned.

'That is essentially correct Mr. Potter,' said Snape in a neutral tone, though Harry could detect the pain it was causing the man to actually complement him. 'It is good to know that the chosen one isn't as hopeless in Defence as he is in Potions,' He sneered.

Instead of infuriating him, the comment only made Harry chuckle, 'Good one Professor,' he said in a chipper tone. He was going to make it his goal to get under the bat's skin as legitimately as possible.

Snape ignored him and continued, 'As Potter said, those who can progress to casting spells without the need of shouting incantations gain a slight element of surprise. Not many wizards can do this as it requires concentration and mind power, which some,' he turned to fix Harry with a malicious gaze, 'lack.'

Harry sat back and fixed Snape with the best arrogant look he could manage, something he had spent hours perfecting in front of a mirror. Snape was insistent on holding a grudge towards both his fathers and damning him for their sins. Harry had grown tired of trying to prove the man wrong. So if Snape insisted on seeing James Potter in Harry and judging him that way, then Harry was going to give him James Potter in his arrogant best. With the added bonus of Sirius Black in his arrogant best, going by what he saw in the mirror when perfecting his I-am-a-poncy-git look. And judging by the look of surprise followed by a look of even deeper loathing in Snape's eyes, Harry had succeeded. Well, no more pretending to be a bigger man for Harry. He was sixteen, damn it! And he was going

to act like it. It was his right to be as insolent and annoying as possible.

When Snape gave instructions for the class to pair up and practise on silent casting, Harry smirked to himself. He had a feeling that Snape was going to personally try and show the class that he, Harry couldn't do it. Well, the git was going to be in for a big surprise!

Snape didn't know it (or maybe he did) but Harry had taught a majority of the class the previous year. However, nobody had cast silently before and it was turning out to be quite hard for them. It was quite entertaining to see the looks of constipation on their faces as one half of the class stood with their wands pointed at their partners without achieving anything. Harry found himself thinking that if it were him, he would have had the ones casting do so verbally while the other half shielded non-verbally. At least this way the other half would be forced to shield instead of standing and waiting for a spell that would never come. Eventually a fair bit of cheating had to occur as most of them whispered the incantations instead of saying it out loud.

Harry was careful to keep his expression neutral as he watched Ron get steadily redder and redder looking to be in great pain as he tried to cast a spell non-verbally. Harry took a quick peek to see what his friend was casting; it looked like that Tickling Hex wasn't going to be coming anytime soon.

'Pathetic Weasley,' said Snape as he swept towards Harry and Ron, drawing the attention of Hermione and Neville. 'Here - let me show you-'

He turned his wand towards Harry so fast that the other students barely saw it. Harry, who was anticipating it, quickly and silently cast a shield charm so strong that it caused Snape to lose his balance and bump into a desk. The whole class stopped what they were doing at the sudden noise and turned around to watch as Snape righted himself.

'That was ... impressive Potter,' said Snape as his eyes bored into Harry's. 'One would almost think that you were practising ...'

'Oh no Professor,' Harry breezed. 'That was my first time! It was as you said, "force of concentration and mind power". I guess I have a

lot of that!' he said with a wide grin on his face, reminding Snape of James Potter after he had won a Quidditch match.

Harry could feel the faint mental probe coming his way and instinctively raised his primary defence. Only he had gained that experience and instinct from Voldemort, who had naturally found the most violent and painful way to do so. Those who tried to break through Voldemort's mind always failed as they were subjected to an excruciating pain. This not only ensured that the person who dared break into his mind was debilitated, but also discouraged them from trying again. That is if they survived the next few minutes in his presence. Something that rarely, if ever, happened since they would probably be finding a Killing Curse headed their way. It took a great deal of concentration, and mental power to break through that. Thus Snape immediately felt a sharp pain in his head, and not expecting it got distracted, due to which he was violently thrown out of Harry's mind, the ejection causing his body to impact with the desk for a second time.

His vision swimming and head throbbing, Snape abruptly dismissed the class five minutes before the bell. The tone of his voice made every student scramble for their bags in order to get out of the class in record time.

'What was all that about?' asked Ron.

'Oh nothing much, just Snape running afoul of my mental defences,' said Harry with an air of self satisfaction. 'I was looking forward to testing them to be honest. It was nice of him to volunteer!'

'But you shouldn't have attacked him so violently,' admonished Hermione, 'and how did you manage to cast that shield spell non-verbally? I couldn't even manage it!'

Harry immediately got irritated at this, 'Well, he was the one who invaded my mind. And considering the identity of the last person to invade my mind, you will forgive me if I don't like it being invaded. Perhaps you will feel differently if it was your mind that was being invaded.' This effectively shut Hermione up.

'That was an impressive bit of Occlumency Harry,' said Neville. 'I really wish I was as advanced as you are.'

'Wait, Neville, you know Occlumency?' said Hermione in what Harry thought was an unnecessary amount of incredulity in her voice.

'Yeah,' said Neville modestly. 'Gran taught me this summer. I'm not too great at it though.'

'But, why would you even need it?' asked Hermione.

'Because Granger, he is required to know it. Every head of House teaches the heir after the heir finishes his O.W.L.s. After all, it is a much needed skill when conducting business.' Sneered Draco Malfoy as he came up behind them. 'I am surprised that Longbottom here has managed to learn that much.' Not waiting for an answer, he sloped off with Nott, smirking.

Ron and Hermione scowled at his back while Harry dismissed Malfoy's existence. If Malfoy was going to ignore Harry, then Harry was more than happy to reciprocate.

'Harry! Hey, Harry!'

Harry turned around; Jack Sloper, one of the Beaters of last year's Gryffindor's Quidditch team was hurrying towards him holding a roll of parchment.

'For you,' he panted heavily. 'Listen, I heard that you're the Captain. So when're you holding trials?'

'I'm not sure yet, I'll let you know,' said Harry in reply, thinking that Sloper would be lucky to get back on the team. He barely heard Sloper's answer as he recognised the handwriting on the parchment. Unrolling it confirmed his theory. The first of Dumbledore's private lessons would be held this Saturday at eight. He looked around for his two friends to tell them this, but couldn't find them anywhere. Puzzled, he asked Neville (whom he noticed was nearby) where they were.

'I dunno,' replied Neville. 'I just saw them disappear a while back.'

'Something bothering you mate?' said Harry noticing the anxious look on Neville's face.

'Well, I want to ask you something, but I don't want to sound nosy or intruding ...' Neville trailed off.

'Why don't you ask your question? If it is something personal or private I'll just tell you.' said Harry after considering Neville's words. The shy boy rarely pried into anyone's business, and Harry wondered what Neville wanted from him.

'OK, I woke up early, and I noticed that you weren't there. Your bed was empty and you weren't in the common room. So was wondering where you had gone. I asked Ron, and he said that you were always up early in the summer ... so, where were you?'

'Oh,' said Harry relaxing a bit. That was an easy question to answer. 'I was out exercising. It's something I've been doing since the summer holidays started.'

Neville took a moment to consider this, 'is it because of, you know, last year at the Ministry?' he dropped his voice at the end looking meaningfully at Harry.

'You knew what Slughorn was talking about at the train didn't you?' said Harry, amused, his voice just as low as Neville's.

Neville just looked at Harry, 'well, it wasn't hard to connect the dots. It was pretty obvious what the Death Eaters were after. We also saw your name written on it remember?'

'Fair enough,' Harry conceded. 'Yes, it is because of that. I am training myself to be able to last longer the next time when I face the bastard. The running is part of it.'

Neville looked at him for a moment, 'can I join you?' he asked at length.

'Why?' said Harry not missing a beat.

'To be able to fight back of course,' said Neville matter-of-factly.

'I don't want to drag you into this Neville. This isn't your fight,' said Harry cautiously. He wasn't willing to bring someone he knew into this conflict. He didn't want to lose another friend.

'Isn't my fight? Of course it is my fight! Weren't you there in St. Mungo's? Didn't you see my parents lying there, insane? Well, in case you didn't know, or forgot, they ended up there because of that bitch Bellatrix Lestrange, her husband and her brother-in-law! They are still out there working for him and I want them to pay! Not only that, but V-Voldemort and his Death Eaters are the reason so many people have died. Look at the number of students in our generation! The reason there are so few of us was because of that creature! He is decimating people in my world, so you can be assured that it is my fight as well! It is every witch and wizard's fight!'

Harry raised his eyebrows at this. While Neville had taken care to keep his voice down, the heat and passion in his voice was unmistakable. Well, at least it proved that Neville was willing to do what it takes.

'Alright then,' Harry said with abrupt calm. 'We'll have to get you the right stuff then. Robes are rather restrictive after all.'

'S-so you'll let me join then?' said Neville taken aback by Harry's sudden change in mood.

'Sure Neville! I only wanted to know if you had the desire to see this through. Because I warn you right now, it will be hard.'

'I can handle it,' said Neville with confidence. 'Besides, I don't know about you, but with Occlumency I have found myself waking up earlier than usual.'

'Yeah, same here,' replied Harry, 'Alright then, I don't think you have the proper clothes or shoes to go running or do most of the things, so we're going to have to sneak into London to take care of that ... I reckon that Saturday afternoon would be the best time to do that.' He said thoughtfully.

'Sure,' said Neville. 'Er, would you mind if I brought along two others?' he asked nervously.

'Who are they?' asked Harry warily. Having Neville was bad enough, but with four people totally, it would be harder.

'Susan and Hannah,' Neville replied. 'We had talked over the summer after Susan's aunt escaped that attack. Initially we thought

that the DA would continue, and when we heard that you weren't going to continue it, we were thinking of convincing you to do so anyway. But this sounds like a better idea.'

'Very well,' said Harry resignedly.

Just then the bell rang, and Neville left to tell Susan and Hannah the news while Harry went up to the common room. He used the free period to do Snape's assigned homework; it really was too bad the git had assigned homework just after his lecture. At any rate, Harry found that thanks to his studies in the summer and the practise he had put in helped a lot in understanding the material and finishing the work assigned in record time just in time for lunch.

Harry spent lunch among the Gryffindor first-years. The moppets had tracked him down quickly enough and spent the lunch period talking about their first impression of Hogwarts. Harry patiently listened to them, asking them questions about their classes, and giving them tips on how to survive the different teachers and navigate the castle. They were rather engaging and before Harry knew it, lunch was already over.

Harry spent the after lunch free period he had talking to Katie and her seventh-year friends. Katie was pretty popular and knew almost one member from all four houses.

He made his way down the familiar path down towards the Potions classroom. Not even Snape's change in position influenced where Potions was held. Entering the corridor, he noticed that only a dozen of his year mates had made it into the class. There were four Slytherins; Daphne, Zabini, Malfoy and Nott, four Ravenclaws, including Anthony Goldstein, and Ernie Macmillan, the only Hufflepuff. Harry was speaking to Ernie, and Anthony with Daphne and Zabini saying an occasional word or two when Ron and Hermione finally made their appearance.

'Where were you guys? I've been looking all over for you!' said Harry after Ernie greeted them. Not that he would admit that he actually hadn't.

Before Ron or Hermione could reply, the door to the classroom opened and Slughorn appeared before them, preceded by his belly.

As they filed in, Slughorn reserved his best and brightest smiles for Harry and Zabini.

The students looked at the potions bubbling away in the large cauldrons with interest. It was unusual to see potions already made in the class. Snape had never bothered to demonstrate before. He always loved to lecture on the uses of the potion, how to extract and prepare the ingredients, and (if he was in a good mood, which was never) how the ingredients reacted to each other. In the practical periods, he would just put the directions down, expecting the students to have understood everything fully. After all, if they had doubts, they would have asked! Never mind that the only people brave enough to ask Snape were some really studious Ravenclaws and the Slytherins.

The Ravenclaws and Slytherins all decided to sit with their own housemates, leaving the three Gryffindors and Ernie to share a table. As everyone settled down and started to bring out their supplies, Harry raised his hand as he hadn't bought the supplies.

'Ah yes, Professor McGonagall did mention ... not to worry, dear boy, not to worry. I'm sure we can lend you two a couple of scales. You can use the ingredients from the store cupboard and manage with some of the old books lying around here till you write to Flourish and Blotts.' With that, Slughorn walked over to the small cupboard to the side and took out two old and worn books, which he handed to Harry and Ron along with a set of tarnished scales each.

With that taken care of, Slughorn started off the class with a small test to see if they recognised the potions he had prepared. This of course, was Hermione's time to shine as her hand shot up time and time again before she rattled off the name of the potion, its properties and characteristics to an increasingly bemused Slughorn. Harry was confused when she kept shooting slightly triumphant looks at him after identifying each potion. What brought that on? He thought.

'Impressive my dear,' said a clearly impressed Slughorn after Hermione finished describing Amortentia, a love potion, in excruciating detail, ending by giving way too much information on what she likes. Though Harry wasn't too surprised that she liked the smell of fresh parchment, he was slightly nauseated by her liking

freshly mown grass. He had enough of mowing the backyard at the Muggles' place to care about it. It was a good thing that she stopped there. He did not know what he would have done if she confessed to liking the smell of detergent. 'And, what is your name?'

'Hermione Granger sir'

'Granger? Granger? Are you perhaps related to Hector Dagworth-Granger, the founder of the Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers?'

'No I didn't think so sir, I'm Muggle-born you see.'

'Oho!' said Slughorn looking at Harry, "'one of my best friends is Muggle-born and she is the best in our year!" I assume that this is the very friend you speak of, Harry?'

'Yes, sir,' said Harry. He'd really been hoping that Slughorn hadn't remembered that outburst. Though when he saw Malfoy's face, Harry thought it wasn't as bad. The look of shock and surprise that replaced the anticipation really was rather funny.

'What's so impressive in that? I'd have said the same if he'd asked me!' Ron cut across Hermione's gushing sounding a bit annoyed. He shut his mouth, looking rather disgruntled as Hermione made 'sush'ing gestures as Slughorn started to talk more about Amortentia.

Harry's estimation of Slughorn's prowess as a Potions master went up when Slughorn revealed what the golden potion that was splashing rather merrily in a small black cauldron on his desk was. Now this was what Snape had spoken about in first year. Only Slughorn actually made the potion. Harry began to wonder if Snape had ever brewed a potion in his life.

What was more, Slughorn was actually offering a vial of Felix Felicis to the best brewer of the day! The man really knew how to make a class work, as everyone was bent over their cauldron in concentration. Harry also got down to it, eagerly opening his book to the page. He frowned at the book; it was heavily written in. The previous owner had actually taken issue with some of the author's instructions, going as far as to scratch out some instructions and writing over it. Frowning, Harry got the necessary ingredients and got to work.

Within ten minutes, the class was full of bluish steam emanating out of twelve cauldrons. Harry bent over to decipher the next set of instructions. The previous owner had scratched that out and replaced it with his own directions.

'Sir, I think you knew my grandfather, Abraxas Malfoy?' Harry looked up as Slughorn passed by Malfoy's table.

'Yes, I did. I was sorry to hear that he had died, though it wasn't surprising. Dragon Pox at his age...' Slughorn said, not even looking at Malfoy. Harry smirked as he bent back over the table. It looked like Malfoy would have to rely on talent here. He really should've figured that out when he wasn't invited at the train compartment that Slughorn wasn't interested in him.

The Sopophorous Bean was proving rather hard to cut. On a whim, Harry decided to follow the alternative instructions and crushed it with the flat side of his dagger. He was rather surprised when the shrivelled Bean released more juice than it could possibly hold. Scooping it up, he added it to his potion to see it turn the exact shade of lilac as described in the book. His annoyance at the previous owner of the book vanishing on the spot, Harry started tentatively at first, and more confidently later on, following the alternative instructions given. The end result, even to his untrained eye, looked much better than the potion Hermione had made.

Slughorn definitely agreed with Harry's private assessment as he happily declared Harry the winner, waxing poetic about Harry's obvious talent in the field which, as he assured the class, was clearly inherited from his mother.

Harry felt a deep satisfaction at the look of murder in Malfoy's face. He also felt a slight amount of guilt at the look of disappointment at Hermione's face, but that feeling went away quickly. He had, after all, tried to help her. It wasn't his fault that she decided to follow the book instead.

Harry finally told Hermione and Ron the whole truth about the book at dinner at the Gryffindor table. As he described the book, Hermione's face became stonier and stonier. He looked at her challengingly and said aggressively, 'I suppose that you think that I've cheated?'

'Well, it was hardly your work,' she sniffed.

Ron however was on his side, claiming that it those were only a set of different instructions which Harry took a big risk in following. Not that Hermione was convinced, judging by the expression on her face which was the same one she wore when she was arguing about S.P.E.W.

When they got to the common room, Hermione and Ron brought out their Defence homework.

'Aren't you doing your homework Harry?' asked Hermione inquiringly when Harry made no motion to bring out his own work.

'Nah, I already did it,' said Harry, 'Finished it in the free period before lunch actually. It was rather easy.'

'Oh?' Hermione said rather sceptically. 'Well then you won't mind if I look through it would you?'

'It's OK Hermione, I checked it myself. I couldn't have done any better. To tell the truth, I actually had to cut down on the wording a bit. My first draft was three inches too long.' Harry didn't like the tone in which his friend was talking to him, but didn't let it show in his face and tone when he answered her.

'Did you copy from another person for that too?' she said snidely.

She was caught off track by the blank expression on Harry's face. Harry fixed her with a haughty look, his eyes glowing green as he said, 'If that is what you think Hermione' his suddenly frigid voice turned arctic at the last word. Abruptly standing he gave a theatrical stretch and said, 'Well, I think I'll turn in early now, it's been a long day.' He ruffled his hair, unconsciously making the few girls staring at him to sigh dreamily, leaving a spluttering Hermione in his wake. Silently fuming at what she had said. How dare she accuse him of cheating like that?

'Some people cannot take a joke,' said Hermione after a moment's awkward silence. 'What?' she said defensively upon looking at Ron's face. Ron just shrugged and resumed working on his assignment. He personally felt that Hermione was a bit too accusative for that to

be a joke as she so claimed. But he wasn't going to say that out loud. He didn't want to argue with her again.

Important note: I have had a few reviewers who have had issues with the fact that I haven't used double quotations when framing speech (I have difficulty in understanding why that is an issue in the first place). Now I go with the philosophy that for every person who actually steps up and asks a question, there are ten others who have the same doubt but don't say anything. So in an effort to clarify those doubts and prevent any further misunderstanding: I use single quotation marks or single quotes (') instead of double quotes or double quotation marks (") when framing speech. It is proper English, I assure you, and very much in use. Please look up 'single quotes' in Google if you don't believe me.

I hope this clears any doubts people have and that no one takes offence to this ...

Anyway, on with the story,

Cheers!

Over the next few days of the week, Harry used the alternate instructions he had found in the potions book written by someone who, as he later found out, went by the moniker, "the Half-Blood Prince" in every one of his Potions classes. This had the effect of improving his Potions skills to such a level that Slughorn was shortly raving about his skills, going so far as to say that he hadn't ever taught anyone as talented as Harry. Of course, this also resulted in Hermione getting increasingly irritable at him to the point of giving him filthy looks every time they were required to brew a potion irritated that Harry would use what she called "cheap shortcuts". Harry privately thought that she was really irritated with the fact that she hadn't thought of the same innovative methods as the Prince.

Ron was not that much better. Only he wanted a part of the glory. At first Harry had agreed and would keep the book between them so that the red head could read the instructions as well. However this soon proved to be impossible. Ron, for some reason had a hard time deciphering the cramped handwriting of the Half-Blood Prince than Harry. And it was useless trying to whisper the instructions to him as not only did they have bubbling cauldrons to contend with but also the small hisses of disapproval that kept coming from Hermione's mouth which, as she wanted to avoid being caught by Slughorn, became progressively lower in pitch and more drawn out

to the point that, by the end of the second lesson, she was beginning to sound like a particularly dim snake.

Nevertheless, that meant that Ron wasn't able to understand what Harry was saying. He couldn't ask Harry to repeat what he was saying without it sounding suspicious. So in the end, Ron was also displeased with the situation. Though most of his displeasure was directed at Hermione after Harry pointed out that the noises she was making was the main reason for him not getting the instructions right. Not that Hermione cared. She insisted that Ron follow the "official instructions" like everyone else.

Harry had also met Susan and Hannah along with Neville about the morning exercises. Initially he was wary about including the girls in, especially after Hannah's initial declaration that she wasn't into all that. But in the end he needn't have worried. Susan especially was helpful as she had promised to get equipment that Aurors used to train with, thus negating the need for a trip into Muggle London. All they had to do was give their measurements. And Hannah had apparently changed her mind. Though when asked why, she would just blush and change the subject.

The promised equipment came as a package through owl post in two days. Harry and the other three had snuck off to open it after class. Upon opening the package, Harry found, among the usual pairs of running trousers and t-shirts, four pairs of unusual looking shoes. 'What are these?' he asked Susan while examining a pair his size. It looked more like a slipper but where the end would be rounded off as with most footwear, these had five toes jutting out, looking very much like gloves for feet.

'These are the latest in running equipment,' said Susan reading from a note from her aunt that was included with the package. 'They are supposed to fit the foot exactly and give the feeling of running barefoot. Auntie says that they are planning on incorporating these with the standard Auror training material ... and we're the guinea pigs.'

Neville held his pair up in front of him. 'They look weird,' he said flatly.

'I was going for "ugly" actually,' said Hannah.

'They are pretty comfortable though,' said Harry as he put on his pair. He wiggled his toes, the shoes fit like a glove. Walking around, he sighed blissfully; he never felt so free before!

'They still look weird,' said Hannah.

'So?' said Harry. 'It's not like you're going to be wearing them every day! Though I am tempted...' he looked at the shoes thoughtfully, 'I suppose a Glamour charm won't work?' he asked Susan.

'I don't think so,' said Susan. 'The shoes already have a bevy of comfort and durability charms in them. Adding more magic may blow the shoes up.'

'Oh well,' shrugged Harry, 'At least I have a good pair of running shoes.'

And so by Saturday, Harry had the company of two Hufflepuffs and Neville. While the other three still were behind as far as fitness was concerned, they did show eagerness in building themselves up. Harry made it a point to moderate his pace so that he was running behind the rest. He did it to ensure that they were running properly and at the right pace, not so that he could look at the girls' shapely behinds. At least that is what he kept telling himself as his eyes kept wandering down that area.

His breakfast finished, Harry bade his new friends' goodbye and went up to the Ancient Runes class. Professor Babbling had set up these Saturday classes along with Professor Vector for students that had some difficulty in the normal class the previous year. This meant that the classroom was full of fourth- and fifth-years.

'Ah Mr. Potter,' said Professor Babbling. 'You turned up, that's good. Initially there were two others in your year that were going to join you, but they changed their minds at the last minute. I was expecting the same of you, to be honest. But now that you've come...' she trailed off a bit as she searched for someone, 'I'll leave you in the capable hands of Ms. Greengrass over there.' she grabbed the attention of a fourth-year girl who was talking to the group her peers and called her over. 'She is one of the best in my fourth-year class and had volunteered to help out in my remedial classes. But since you are the only sixth-year here, I think it would be better if she tutored you and the other fourth years in the basics while I take care

of that group of fifth years. They have their O.W.L.s coming up and they are behind as it is!

Quickly introducing the two to each other, she hurried off to the group of fifth-years.

'So, Daphne has a younger sister,' said Harry after a minute of silence. To this the younger girl just gave him a toxic sarcastic look that clearly conveyed her opinion of his brilliance. He was validated when the younger girl opened her mouth.

'Brilliant deduction there, Potter! Did you figure that out on your own? I wonder what gave me away.' Astoria Greengrass said with sarcasm dripping from every syllable.

Not to be outdone, Harry replied brightly, 'It was the looks for me!' In a mock serious tone he added, 'The last name was another hint that you might be related to Daphne.'

Astoria just rolled her eyes at that and moved towards the group of fourth-years, muttering to herself. Harry could make out the words 'my sister' and 'doomed' among the other incomprehensible words.

Thanks to the crash course he had from Bill and Fleur over the summer along with his self study, Harry found that he was quite far ahead in the third-year syllabus. Astoria was pretty impressed with his knowledge, and, though she did not show it, slightly jealous of Harry from having had personal tutoring from a Gringotts Curse Breaker.

They eventually decided to pair up divide the load of teaching the other fourth-years who had barely managed to pass the third year exam, which was how Professor Babbling found them when she came over to their group.

The Professor was pretty impressed with Harry's knowledge of the subject so far. After some thinking it was decided that from the next class, Astoria would be teaching Harry the remainder of the third-year course while she would bring over another one of her bright students to help the fourth-years out. By the end of the term, depending on where Harry was, Professor Babbling would make the appropriate decision. Astoria however didn't seem too pleased by the whole thing.

As class ended, Astoria gave Harry a big smile, 'well, Runes is over for the day Potter, we won't be seeing each other for a week at the least!' her smile slowly slipped away as Harry continued to sit there in place as the Arithmancy class entered. 'You're here for Arithmancy too aren't you?' she said resignedly.

'Brilliant deduction there, Greengrass! Did you figure that out on your own? I wonder what gave it away.' Harry parroted her words from earlier with a cheeky grin earning him a venomous look from the younger girl.

Much to her relief, Astoria didn't need to tutor Harry that day as because Professor Vector had given Harry a test to gauge his competence with numbers. Harry found most of the questions to be easy partly due to them being simple mathematical problems he had learnt in primary school and partly due to the summer he had spent studying the subject.

Professor Vector was pretty impressed with Harry's current grasp of the subject and had him help out the fourth-years along with Astoria who would be tutoring him in the next class just like she was doing in Ancient Runes.

Harry spent the afternoon socialising with his year mates. He even went out flying for awhile with some of them, playing a friendly match of Quidditch. Fresh from the game, with a rosy glow on his cheeks from the wind he found Ron and Hermione in the Gryffindor common room working. Going up to the dorm, he changed out of his sweaty clothes and picking up his bag went back down to join them.

'Hey,' he said easily as he carelessly threw himself on a chair next to them. Looking at the essay in front of his friends, he noted that they were working on the homework McGonagall had set for them. Having already finished his essay, Harry sat back and on a whim opened up his old copy of the Potions book.

Hermione only sniffed at the sight of the book in Harry's hand before twitching her essay up and away from Ron's prying eyes.

'Don't you have your homework to do Harry?' said Hermione after a few minutes of silence which she spent alternatively looking at him and on her essay.

'I've already finished all my homework,' said Harry easily. Inwardly he tensed up expecting another verbal battle with her.

Just as he suspected, Hermione said in response, 'Really? May I have a look at it then?' he thought he detected a note of challenge in that question. As if she didn't believe he had done his work.

'Hermione!' said Harry in apparent shock, 'I cannot believe that you would want to copy from my assignment! That is cheating that is! Who'd have thought that Hermione Granger would want to copy from me?' he directed the last question to Ron who by then had given up figuring what to write next in his essay and was watching the conversation between Harry and Hermione in amusement.

'I don't want to copy from you, you prat!' said Hermione in irritation over Ron and Harry's chuckling. 'I wanted to look through your essay because I am sure that there will be mistakes in it. That is, if you have completed it,' the scepticism in her voice was more than apparent.

Harry only gave her a wide smile at that. 'Yes, I have completed it and no, you don't need to see it because there are no mistakes in it. I checked the essay myself.'

'If you're sure,' said Hermione unconvinced.

Harry narrowed his eyes at her at this. There was something in her tone that he didn't like. He really hoped she didn't do something stupid like remove his homework from his bag. After awhile, he looked at his watch and got up hurriedly saying, 'I'd better go, I've got to meet Dumbledore soon and I'm going to be late if I don't hurry.' With that, he hurried up the stairs barely listening to Hermione's excited gasps. He put his bag in his trunk, double checked his locks and wards like usual and hurried out the common room, waving to his friends.

Reaching the gargoyle he said the password and rode up the moving spiral staircase after the gargoyle jumped aside. He was barely able to restrain his excitement at what he was about to learn from Dumbledore.

Minutes later however, that excitement was replaced with bitter disappointment. Harry looked at the headmaster in slight disbelief as Dumbledore took out Harry's Pensive and put in a memory from an abject stranger without so much as a by-your-leave. He should've known that the old man was going to pull something like this. When Dumbledore had first told him over the summer that he was going to be giving Harry private lessons, Harry was initially elated. He thought that the old man had finally come around, that now he was going to start properly training Harry to defeat Voldemort. Harry had fully expected to be given pointers in duelling strategy and casting spells. He even had expected to be taught some arcane and rare spells as yet unheard of (despite Hermione's insistence on the contrary).

What he wasn't expecting however was for Dumbledore to show him the memory of some idiot Ministry worker who in all probability was a half-blood or pureblood, if the way that man dressed was anything to go by. Honestly, a one piece bathing suit? The man already looked like a mole to begin with thanks to the huge thick glasses on his short fat face. The bathing suit did not help his figure any. Luckily for Harry's youthful innocence (what was left of it anyway) Bob Ogden was wearing a frock coat. Harry shuddered to think of what he would've seen had the wizard decided to forego that thanks to the obviously hot summer's day in the memory.

Harry and Dumbledore followed the man down the country lane. The clear summer sky overhead coupled with the plant life on either side of the country lane filled Harry with a sense of tranquillity, his mind to coming up with images of a completely made up childhood. It was only by breathing in the air and noticing a lack of smell did Harry remember that this was a memory and nothing else. As they gazed down the village of Little Hangleton, Harry was for a brief moment transported to his fourth year when he and Cedric grabbed that cup. Harry would never forget that tall mausoleum in the centre which could be seen all the way from where he was currently standing. Shaking himself out of the memory and the potentially depressing thoughts that it would lead to, Harry concentrated on following Bob Ogden. He finally had a name to that nightmarish site-Little Hangleton. It definitely looked different in the light of day.

'You are not welcome' the chilling words brought Harry to the present. While he was thinking he had unconsciously been following Dumbledore and the odd man that was Bob Ogden. Looking around,

the owner of the voice was found to be a short monkey-like man holding a dagger with matted hair and dressed in filthy rags. Harry could make out a rundown shack a bit into the distance nestled in the grove of trees that he suddenly found himself in. If it wasn't for the smoke coming out of the open window, the house (if it could be called one) would've been thought of as abandoned.

The current occupants of the house certainly lacked proper taste, mused Harry as he looked at the dead snake nailed to the door. Though, he concluded as the tramp hit Ogden with a curse that made yellow pus ooze out of his nose, the occupants did seem to be on the violently insane side.

It took all of Harry's self control not to stop dead at the name Ogden referred the man to and follow conversation. Harry distinctly remembered the name Gaunt on his family tree. At first he thought that it was a mistake, or that it was another family with the same name, but the Parseltongue he had observed the father and son conversing in stopped that line of thought. Morfin at any rate seemed incapable or unwilling to speak English.

'Ar, that was Morfin,' said the old man indifferently. 'Are you pure-blood?' he asked, suddenly aggressive.

'That's neither here nor there,' said Ogden coldly. Harry could detect a hint of defensiveness in the voice.

Definitely Halfblood then or possibly Muggleborn, thought Harry, though he doesn't seem too proud of it.

Harry looked at the interior of the house where Morfin was playing with an adder and hissing to it. So these are the Gaunts, descended from Salazar Slytherin, he thought as he looked at the deformed faces of the family. They really have fallen far. He wondered what had happened to such an ancient and noble house that they were living in squalor. Perhaps the Chamber of Secrets held those answers. He had no idea that the magical side of the family was still alive. Not that Harry would want to publically acknowledge any relationship to these ... people.

They certainly hadn't lost their pride, Harry observed as he saw the way father and son talked down on the Ministry worker. Their

arrogance came close to beating a typical Malfoy or Black despite their ugly features and worse than Weasley appearance.

Harry received his third shock of the day as the old man showed Ogden the ring on his finger. It was the same one he had seen on Dumbledore's hand in the summer, albeit less tarnished with the stone whole! How were the two connected? And the name Peverell sounded familiar...

And the shocks didn't end there; after some more arguing Gaunt then grabbed his daughter and dragged the poor pitiful woman forward by a locket on her neck to show the same to Ogden. The sight of the locket on her neck triggered another vision, as unbidden, from the very depths of his mind, a rush of colour, lights and sound came to his consciousness coalescing into a memory;

He was looking down at the battered form of a woman lying on a bed in a cheap inn, her plain features twisted in confusion and pain, slowly turning into horror as she gazed upon the red gleam he knew was shining in his eyes. He smiled coldly at her as he watched her engulfed by the green light that came out of his wand...

The phantom pain that accompanied this vision was lesser than the pain Harry had experienced in the last vision he had that was triggered by the ring he had noticed on Dumbledore's finger in the summer.

'...Slytherin's!' yelled Gaunt, bringing Harry back to the present, 'Salazar Slytherin's! We're his last living descendants, what do you say to that, eh?'

Lovely, thought Harry sardonically. That definitely cleared up any remaining doubts that these were the same Gaunts as Morag Gaunt. Not that Harry was happy about it. The only way it could possibly get worse was if Voldemort was descended from them.

He really hated being right at times, Harry decided as he saw the young man who looked a lot like the memory of Tom Riddle on the gleaming chestnut horse, laughing at the spectacle that was a fleeing and dusty Bob Ogden at the end of the memory. He really should have twigged on that as soon as he heard them raving about being the descendants of Slytherin, and speaking Parseltongue.

Though now that he thought about it, their insanity and propensity to violence was further confirmation that Voldemort was descended from them ... after all, Voldemort was just about as insane and violent as his uncle and grandfather. Not to mention bleeding ugly.

Harry sat in the chair opposite Dumbledore's for a good few minutes processing the information revealed in the memory, while Dumbledore waited patiently for him to speak.

'I'm guessing that the family Bob Ogden had visited were Voldemort's maternal family,' Harry half stated half questioned coming out of his stupor.

'You would be correct, and that Muggle on the horse was Tom Riddle Senior, Voldemort's father, while the old man Marvolo Gaunt was his grandfather and Morfin his uncle,' said Dumbledore.

Harry sniffed in response, 'She really isn't much to look at, so I assume that love potions or enchantments were involved. Judging by her competence in performing even the most basic of spells, I would assume that it was more of the former than the latter.' He paused, still deep in thought. 'Her family weren't exactly Muggle friendly, so I don't see them approving of this, and she seems too meek to sneak about with them around ... thus they would have to be taken out of the picture ... from the memory you showed just now, I would hazard a guess and say that Bob there came back with some friends and brought Morfin and Marvolo in for a nice stay in Azkaban.'

'Indeed,' said Dumbledore with faint amusement. 'Ogden Apparated back to the Ministry and returned with reinforcements within fifteen minutes. Morfin and his father attempted to fight, but both were overpowered, removed from the cottage, and subsequently convicted by the Wizengamot. Morfin, who already had a record of Muggle attacks, was sentenced to three years in Azkaban. Marvolo, who had injured several Ministry employees in addition to Ogden, received six months.'

'In the absence of her tyrannical and abusive father and brother, Merope Gaunt seized the chance for freedom and possibly used a Love Potion or the Imperius Curse on Tom Riddle to get him to marry her. I suspect, like you, that it was the former, but mainly because a Love Potion would seem more romantic to her. It would

be a simple matter to slip the potion in a drink of cool water on a hot day to a thirsty Tom Riddle ... it caused quite the scandal when the squire's son ran off with the tramp's daughter.'

Harry bit back a sarcastic remark at that. It was rather obvious that Tom Riddle running off with someone like Merope Gaunt would get people gossiping. Not only were they both on the extreme opposite sides in terms of wealth but in terms of looks too. 'But things didn't turn out that well did they?' he said instead. From what Voldemort had revealed about his history in the past, Harry knew that he was raised in an orphanage.

'No they didn't,' said Dumbledore heavily. 'Merope probably stopped feeding Tom the love potion after she got pregnant in hopes that he would stay behind. However, as we know, he left her almost immediately, returning to his parent's house and claiming to have been bewitched by her.' He sounded a tad disapproving. 'Destitute and broken-hearted, Merope Gaunt managed to scrounge a living, being forced to sell the only valuable item she had with her, that locket. She eventually gave birth to Voldemort in an orphanage in London in December and died shortly after.'

Harry really couldn't find any sympathy for Merope here. It was her fault that she ended up pregnant without any means of support in the first place. He could understand the Muggle Tom Riddle's reaction to finding out that he had been enthralled by her, but at the same time thought that Merope was pretty stupid to have stopped feeding him the love potion. At the very least she could have made Tom give her everything he owned before stopping the dosage, and then finding out if he was going to stay ... some Slytherin she was.

'I think that will be enough for this evening, Harry,' said Dumbledore after a few moments of silence.

As Harry got up to leave, he noticed the Peverell ring sitting on one of those spindly legged tables that normally supported one of Dumbledore's many frail looking instruments. Harry mentally rolled his eyes, sure that the old man had put it there just so that Harry would notice it. With a sigh he asked Dumbledore about it not really expecting an answer. He wasn't disappointed; with a smile Dumbledore dismissed him mentioning that Harry could share some of what he learnt today and would learn in future lessons with Ron

and Hermione since they were trustworthy. He also warned Harry to keep such knowledge between the three of them. Harry agreed to that. It wasn't as if Ron and Hermione had friends to tell in the first place. Except Ginny that is.

Distracted and thinking about what he had seen so far, Harry entered the Gryffindor common room where he was brought out of his musing by his aforementioned friends demanding to know what Dumbledore had taught him. Harry graced them with his presence for a while listening to them dissect what Dumbledore was trying to achieve before he left them saying that he wanted to go to bed and turn in early.

Situating himself on his bed and drawing the curtains, he sunk into a meditative state to search for the name Peverell within his memories. He didn't need to search for long before he got the memory associated with that name. Hurriedly getting off his bed, he opened his trunk and rooted around a bit. With a triumphant exclamation, he extricated his copy of the family tree which was the result of the lineage test he had done in Gringotts.

Scanning it, he finally found mention of the Peverell name. Sure enough, just as he remembered it, was the name Cecelia Peverell. She had married a Radulfus Potter, Harry's many times great grandfather sometime in the thirteen hundreds. There wasn't any mention of siblings so Harry guessed that she was an only child. That didn't, however, rule out the fact that she may have had a relative who had married into the Gaunt line. Lovely thought Harry sarcastically, another connection to that snake-faced wanker, just what I need. His mood did not improve when he saw the name Morag Gaunt written on the middle column with a single line connecting the ancient wizard to his mother. Harry fervently hoped that Morag Gaunt did not have any connections to the family of heathens he had seen in that memory. Though he didn't have high hopes. With his luck, Voldemort was probably his half brother in some twisted way.

Rolling the family tree up, he bent over his trunk to place it back in when he noticed his birthday gift from Ollivander. He hadn't had the chance to read it yet. Making a note to start reading it, he closed his trunk and drew the curtains of his bed closed again.

He looked around the room one more time. The room was just as empty as it had been before he had entered it. He quickly drew his cloak out from his pocket and donned it. Slipping out of the door he snuck downstairs to the common room. Being a Saturday night, the room was still populated by students doing homework or enjoying free time with their friends. However curfew had ended meaning that the entrance won't be opening anytime soon.

Harry was contemplating putting off his trip for another time when the portrait opened and McGonagall stepped inside followed by a first-year. Immediately all noise in the common room ceased as her presence was noticed while she scanned the room. Harry noticed two seventh-years surreptitiously concealing some hip flasks in their pockets.

'Do you know where Mr. Potter is, Ms. Granger?' she finally asked Hermione. Her voice, though soft, carried through the now silent common room. Harry also noted that her lips were pretty thin and there was a look of faint irritation on her face.

Uh-oh thought Harry, whatever she wanted him for, it couldn't be good. She normally reserved that look for people she was about to give detentions to, take points from, or eviscerate. He gave the titch accompanying McGonagall an evil look, certain that she was the one behind this. Not that she noticed, what with him being invisible and all. She did seem nervous though.

'I think he's asleep Professor,' said Hermione.

'Weasley can you go and check?' said Professor McGonagall.

Please don't draw the curtains, please don't draw the curtains thought Harry as he quickly moved out of the way and went to a corner of the common room to avoid bumping into anyone as Ron went up to the sixth-year dorm. If Ron decided to do that and found an empty bed, then he would know that Harry wasn't asleep. Shortly McGonagall would know. That would then raise questions as to exactly where Harry was if he wasn't in the tower despite Ron and Hermione having seen him go up the dorm, along with half the house. Harry was sure that the situation would get really ugly then.

'He's definitely asleep professor, the curtains of his bed were drawn and he didn't answer when I called his name.' said Ron coming down.

Thank Merlin thought Harry as he silently slumped against the wall.

'Do you want me to wake him up?' asked Ron. Harry tensed up again, hoping with all his might that McGonagall didn't say yes.

McGonagall took a moment to think on that before saying, 'No that will not be necessary, Mr. Weasley.' Harry slumped against the wall again. 'It can wait till tomorrow. I want all the Gryffindor prefects along with Mr. Potter to meet me after breakfast. We can have our weekly meeting then instead of later tonight.'

'Please Professor; may I know what this is about? Harry isn't in trouble is he?' asked Hermione. Thinking quickly, Harry started creeping across the room, careful not to make any sound till he was in front of McGonagall and in between his head of house and friend.

'You will find out tomorrow Ms. Granger,' said McGonagall cryptically. 'I expect all of you at my office at ten tomorrow sharp.' Hearing Ron groan softly, she said, 'Yes that means you as well Mr. Weasley. I don't care how early it is on a Sunday morning, but I want you there and you better be presentable. I will not be pleased if you arrive wearing your pyjamas or yesterday's clothes. You better have bathed as well.' With that she turned around to exit out of the portrait hole ignoring the titters coming out as well as the slightly embarrassed expression on Ron's face.

Now behind her, Harry followed McGonagall, sticking so close to her that his chest was nearly touching the back of her head. He was careful to ensure that he was matching her stride step by step. It was thanks to his Quidditch reflexes that he managed not to bump into her as she stopped abruptly just in front of the entrance. Quickly backing up a few steps, he hoped that she hadn't suspected anything as she turned her head. 'Oh, and Mr. Williams and Mr. Caruthers, I will very much appreciate it if you don't share the contents of your flask with the younger years. You won't like the consequences should you be found giving alcohol to minors.' Her sharp gaze picked out the two now sheepish seventh years that Harry had noticed before. As she opened the portrait wide enough

Harry slipped through quickly. She barely felt a breeze as he passed by.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Harry watched McGonagall walk off briskly towards her quarters. He spent a moment wondering what she wanted him for along with the other prefects before shrugging. He would find out later anyway. There was no need to waste time thinking about that. He had work to do.

He swiftly and silently made his way towards the second floor, avoiding the prefect and teacher patrols using his father's map. He had also activated his necklace for further security. Stopping outside the out of order girls' bathroom, Harry paused a moment to look around the corridor. It had been nearly four years since he had last traversed this corridor, and the ominous messages that had been put there all those years back were still as vivid and bright red as ever. It looked like Filch still hadn't been able to wash it away. Wonder how pissed off it will make him if someone were to mention this? Thought Harry amused.

Seeing that nobody was around in his vicinity, and that it would be five minutes at the earliest by the time the next person entered the corridor, Harry opened the door and quietly slipped in. He checked his map again; Myrtle wasn't around in the bathroom (she was lurking in the prefects' bathrooms again ... poor Ernie ... it probably was for the best he not be told about that). Deactivating the map and removing the cloak, Harry approached the sink at the far end.

'Open,' he hissed in Parseltongue. The tap started glowing at this as the sink sank out of sight, leaving behind a large opening, where, after casting a cleaning charm, Harry quickly slid down.

Only to be brought up short. The cleaning charm had removed the slime, but at the same time without the lubricating effects of the slime, the friction between his clothes and the stone was too high to allow him to slide down the pipe effectively, meaning that he was stuck a few feet from the entrance, which shortly closed after him, leaving him no choice but to go down. So Harry was reduced to awkwardly scooting along on his backside cursing all the way. Fortunately, it wasn't for long as he soon found that his cleaning charm hadn't cleaned out the whole pipe. Gratefully, Harry let himself go down this section and slid the rest of the way down.

Landing at the exit on the damp floor with a wet thump as he was ejected, just as slimy as the last time he had done this.

Still swearing and cursing, he waved his wand over his clothes, clearing the slime out. Now marginally cleaner but still swearing (he hadn't been able to get it out of his hair) he continued down the tunnel till he came to the second obstacle.

Harry stopped short and looked at the solid wall of broken rock that was there before him. He couldn't believe that he had completely forgotten about that part. The hole that he had crawled out with Ginny also looked to be too small for him to slip through it now! Had he really been that small then? It would take quite a bit of time to get that cleared away safely without causing a bigger cave in and losing access to the Chamber for good.

Well might as well get that taken care of first he thought as his eyes fell on the shed basilisk skin that was lying close to the cave in. He had no idea what use the skin would come to, but better safe than sorry. Besides, it still looked as pristine as it had done before. About to call his elf, he stopped short; I'm such an idiot, he mentally said as he called Randolph.

The distinguished head elf instantly appeared at his master's side, 'Sir is calling Randolph?' the elf inquired politely. Either it was the elf's training, or all elves were weird that way as Randolph didn't even question what they were doing in such a place. In fact, he acted as if meeting his master in dark strange tunnels with shed basilisk skin was completely normal.

'Er, yes,' said Harry, 'do we have a place where we can store ingredients especially animal parts indefinitely?'

'Yes sir, there is a room like that in Potter Manor with stasis charms to prevent the items from going bad. You would know if you had gone there sir.' The elf tacked in the last bit in a slightly disapproving manner.

'All in good time Randolph. Right now going there isn't safe for me or for the family.' Said Harry, soothing the elf's ruffled feathers 'make no mistake I plan on visiting the place as soon as possible. Now, about that skin ...' he asked leadingly.

'It shall be done sir,' said Randolph. With a click of his fingers, the skin was moved to the storage space.

'Thank you Randolph,' said Harry. 'By the way, how fast can you get that cave in repaired?' he pointed to the wall of rock before him.

The elf looked at the cave in for a while before saying, 'It will take time sir,' he said slowly, 'we'll have to be careful not to damage the tunnel any further. I do know of five elves how know how to do this properly.' Falling silent he looked at the cave in closely before saying hesitantly, 'They should be able to finish it within a day I think.'

'Very well,' said Harry, 'that should be fine. Can you transport me to the other side for now?' Harry doubted that the anti-apparation wards around Hogwarts extended this far, and he felt too lazy to find out.

The elf took Harry's hand in response and with a 'pop', Harry found himself on the other side of the cave in.

'Thanks Randolph. One other thing though. There is a rather large, dead magical animal and since I killed it I figure that it is mine anyway. So do you know if any of the elves that can render it down to potions ingredients?'

'It will depend on the animal in question sir,' said the elf after a pause.

'Alright then, let's get down to seeing it!' said Harry as he led the way forward, the elf cautiously following behind.

Coming to a stop at the double doors that led to the Chamber, Harry hissed a quick 'open' which opened the doors. Other than a slight widening of his eyes, Randolph didn't show much of a reaction to Harry's ability to be able to speak Parseltongue.

Entering the Chamber, Harry's eyes immediately fell on the huge corpse of the basilisk. He was surprised to note that there were no signs of decay on the dead animal. He had fully expected to be assaulted by a horrendous smell of rotting flesh as the snake had been there for a long time. Instead, the corpse looked as fresh as if it had been killed yesterday. Initially Harry thought that it was

because of the snake's magical aura and highly poisonous nature that prevented any microorganisms from digesting it, but then he saw the smear of blood next to the basilisk on the wall which he, (with an unpleasant jolt) recognised as his. The smear though dried out, was still glistening dully in the greenish gloom that permeated the Chamber almost as if Harry had bled there recently and not four years back.

It was this smear that led Harry to suspect a strong preservation ward having been cast on the entire Chamber. It certainly accounted for the relatively pristine condition of the Chamber. After all, for a room that probably hadn't been properly used for a couple of centuries, the Chamber was in a pretty decent condition. All it needed was a bit of cleaning and perhaps some minor repairs.

Randolph gave a small gasp when he saw the basilisk Harry was talking about. Smiling in victory at finally causing the elf to lose control, Harry said with forced nonchalance, 'How long do you think it will take to render that one down?' he waved at the corpse sounding as though it was a small garden snake he was talking about and not a sixty foot long behemoth.

'Dobby, Winky and I can take care of this sir,' said Randolph, his voice cracking a bit as he looked at the massive basilisk that was looming over him. 'Hopefully it shall be done by the end of next week.'

'Wait, those two? I'd better talk to them then,' said Harry, knowing how much Dobby hated Winky and vice versa, it would take much longer for the task to be done if they had to work together.

With a pop the two house-elves appeared, 'Harry Potter sir!' said Dobby bouncing in place as soon as he appeared, 'It has been so long! Dobby was wondering when Master would call on Dobby!'

'Hello Dobby,' said Harry with a smile, 'I hope that you've been enjoying your work? Anyway,' he continued hastily as he saw the elf's eyes go misty at that question. 'I have a task that only you and Winky here will be able to do.' He would never get things done if he let Dobby start wailing about how kind and considerate he was, 'I want you to help Randolph here' he nodded to the head elf and Dobby's boss, 'to render that animal behind you so we can use its parts.'

At this Dobby and Winky turned around and screamed rather loudly when they laid eyes on the basilisk. 'Where is master finding such a big snake?' said Winky wonderingly and slightly hysterically.

Harry took a moment to recover from the ringing in his ears created by the elves high pitched voices. 'I killed it in my second year. This,' he gestured around the room, 'is the Chamber of Secrets'

The three elves took a moment to digest this bit. Even they had heard of the legend of Slytherin's famous Chamber. Dobby was the first to recover. At once he started praising Harry's prowess as a wizard with an increasing amount of worship in his eyes. Shortly he realised that he had tried to prevent Harry from attending Hogwarts. Harry was thankful for that as the elf immediately shut up and started berating himself for being stupid enough to stop "the great and all powerful Harry Potter". Harry was sure that the elf was a step away from actually falling on his knees and bowing and scraping in his presence. That would certainly be embarrassing!

'Well, I want you to get on with this and finish as soon as possible. That means no fighting you two, am I clear?' said Harry in his most stern voice as he looked down at the two elves. The elves agreed meekly.

Harry smiled, 'Good, I also want you lot to clean the place up after you are done with the tunnel cave in and the basilisk. Get some magical lighting in here and see to any repairs. We'll talk about the details tomorrow.' The elves nodded again, and Harry dismissed them.

As soon as the elves left, Harry just remembered that there was no way he could leave the place on his own. Cursing himself, but not wanting to call an elf yet to transport him, Harry started exploring the Chamber. He was sure that Salazar Slytherin had created another entrance and exit. After all, while the pipe entrance was well and good for a snake to use, a human wouldn't be able to exit the Chamber using the same route, even with magic.

After some searching, Harry finally found a tiny engraving of a snake in the left hand side wall. With a hissed 'Open' a section of the wall opened that led to a passageway which Harry was sure was the way out. Traversing the path with his wand lit, he saw that it led to an

antechamber with a tunnel directly opposite him flanked by two archways each framing a blank stretch of wall. Harry continued through the tunnel, and after a bit of walking he came to a blank section on the wall which opened outwards automatically as he approached it leading to a stone staircase leading to a dead end

Going on a hunch, Harry quickly went up the stairs. As soon as he reached the top, the section of wall slid open. Exiting it, he looked around and found himself in the antechamber off the Great Hall where he had been sent to in his fourth year after his name had come out of the Goblet of Fire. Turning around Harry saw the wall soundlessly and smoothly slide back. Examining it, he found a carving of a snake etched into it.

A quick look at his watch revealed that it was rather late. Donning his cloak, Harry made his way back to Gryffindor tower. The late hour meant that he did not run into anyone, even though the map showed the presence of Order members patrolling certain parts of the castle, with what Harry guessed to be Aurors patrolling the school grounds.

Whispering the password to the fat lady (who swung open still asleep) Harry quietly made his way back to his dorm room and went to sleep. He hadn't been able to fully explore the Chamber, but he had found out quite a bit.

Sunday morning Harry decided to have a bit of a lie in. Which, considering the time he normally got up, was still pretty early. After spending a few moments in bed "thinking" (he really needed to find the time to go out soon), Harry got up to get ready for the day. Seeing as it was still early, he decided to pamper himself a bit and headed out to the prefects' bathroom, his bath things in tow. Of course, he made sure to check for the presence of a certain voyeuristic ghost using his map before going there. Perhaps Myrtle hadn't yet moved on because she hadn't shagged yet? Harry blanched at the thought of a live person actually doing the deed with a ghost ... he shook his head violently to rid himself of those thoughts. That really was disturbing! Though it would explain why she was still hanging around after having haunted that schoolmate of hers, Olive Horny-something-or-the-other ... Harry hit his head with his hand repeatedly, trying to beat out the more disturbing images of a physical relationship with a ghost and a live person that started to invade his mind.

He eventually managed to get those thoughts out of his head half way through his bath using Occlumency. Though, he was considering using a memory charm on himself.

Now, feeling better after having finally removed the last vestiges of slime from his scalp that last night's cleaning charm and bath hadn't been able to reach, Harry ambled toward the Great Hall, remembering at the last minute that he wasn't supposed to know about Professor McGonagall's summons.

He bumped into a slightly frantic looking Neville Longbottom as soon as he stepped inside the door.

'Alright, Neville?' he said cheerfully with a grin on his face.

'Harry! There you are! I've been looking all over for you!' said Neville, relief taking over the frantic expression on his face.

'Why were you looking for me?'

'McGonagall wants to see you today after breakfast at ten. Where were you anyway? The girls and I waited for you outside but didn't find you. Eventually we had to continue without you.'

'McGonagall wants me? Whatever for?' said Harry with false bafflement. 'I took the day off by the way. The week was rather hectic and I figured that a day won't hurt me any. After all, I've been at it since the beginning of summer!'

'Oh,' said Neville at this. He shrugged and said, 'McGonagall didn't say what she wanted with you, but she didn't sound well pleased. For some reason she's told the prefects to come as well.'

Harry looked over Neville's shoulder at the staff table hoping to spot Professor McGonagall there. Spotting her, he noted that she had a pretty stern expression on her face. Then again, she always looked stern.

Figuring that it would be a good idea, Harry stared off into the distance putting on a perturbed look on his face. Or at least he hoped it was a perturbed look. He hadn't done perturbed before. He had done hesitant, and was a master of the meek look, but he never had done perturbed.

Apparently it worked since Neville didn't call him out on it when he finally asked the other boy if he had breakfast. Neville shook his head in response and the two of them went to the Hufflepuff table where they joined Susan and Hannah along with the others from Ravenclaw and Slytherin.

Harry shortly found out that most of the school, through means that still eluded him, had found out about the meeting he would be having with Professor McGonagall and all the Gryffindor prefects as they all started asking him questions ranging from 'what nefarious plot have you uncovered today Potter?' to, 'Just what did you do to piss off old McGonagall so much that she's called all the prefects too?' accompanied with expressions ranging from mocking to concerned.

Harry waited for all the questioners to subside before speaking, 'I have no idea why McGonagall wants to meet me today, and I have less of an idea as to why she called all the house prefects. And no Zabini, I haven't done anything recently to piss off McGonagall. I mean it isn't like I killed Filch and his cat. And please don't call her "old McGonagall" again. It reminds me of a song I'd rather forget.'

'You killed Filch's cat?' asked Ernie incredulously just as Justin Finch-Fletchley suddenly started laughing.

'Oh, sorry,' said Justin still chuckling. 'I just got Harry's bit about the song. It's a Muggle thing. More specifically it's a Yank Muggle thing. Not a very good joke though.' At the still blank looks on his friends' faces, he hastily changed the subject, 'so Harry, you killed Filch's cat?'

Harry groaned at this, 'No I didn't kill Filch or his cat!' he said irritably. 'The miserable sod is still alive along with that rabid flea-bitten walking used up dishrag he calls a cat. Unless Fang's caught up with her ... in which case I'd better go talk to Hagrid. He's not going to like it if his dog dies of indigestion.' That generated a few laughs from the rest of the group.

As it got closer to ten, Harry got up from the Hufflepuff table and headed up the first floor towards Professor McGonagall's office. He was shortly joined by Hermione and Ron who was hastily smoothing his still damp hair.

'Hey guys, where were the two of you? Don't you know that McGonagall wants to talk to us soon?' said Harry innocently.

'Where were you?' asked Ron indignantly completely missing the joke. 'We looked everywhere for you! You weren't in bed, the common room or in the bathroom! And I missed breakfast!'

Harry brought his hand up to his chin and looked at Ron with exaggerated thoughtfulness. 'Did you check the Great Hall?' he asked slowly, speaking as if he had just had a great idea. Seeing their dumbfounded looks he carried on in the same vein, 'I get up early every morning.' He then addressed the empty space of air next to him as if there was someone invisible there, 'You'd think people would notice given that they have spent an entire summer with me but noooo.' He paused for a moment and looked at Ron suspiciously, 'And how would you know I wasn't in the bathroom? Did you actually go checking every stall to see if I was there? I understand you are my best friend Ron, but this is ... going beyond ...' he paused with a slightly disgusted look on his face, 'I don't think I'm ready to go further here. It's not you,' he said reassuringly, 'it's me ... I just have an aversion to flat chests ... and penises.'

'Oh, get your mind out of the gutter and grow up Harry!' said Hermione disapprovingly while Ron scowled.

'Grow up? You mean further? Hermione, Hermione, Hermione,' said Harry shaking his head as he started forward to Professor McGonagall's office. 'I've grown up as much as possible. I should tell you now that this is as far as any bloke is going to grow mentally. I'm going to be sixteen till I die!' he declared grandly.

'Very clever Harry,' said Hermione sarcastically, 'using a pop song to make a joke.'

'Sorry?' said Harry as he and Ron looked at her quizzically.

'Oh don't act daft Harry Potter! You know which song I'm talking about!' Seeing the blank expression still on both the boys' faces she rolled her eyes, 'Bryan Adams! Seriously, haven't you heard him? Eighteen till I die, Summer of Sixty-Nine ...'

'Oh, he's Muggle,' said Ron with a look of dawning comprehension on his face that was mirrored by Harry.

'No, I haven't heard of him,' said Harry, 'though he doesn't seem that creative since he's using numbers to name his songs. Come to think of it, he sounds pretty old too with a major midlife crisis.' With that he knocked on Professor McGonagall's office door.

Hermione's reply (and it looked to be an indignant one judging by the look on her face. Harry mused that she might be a major fan of this Bryan bloke) was interrupted as Professor McGonagall called them inside her office after Harry knocked on the door.

'Good to see you here on time Mr. Potter, Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley. The others haven't arrived yet so we will have to wait for them ... please, be seated,' she indicated the seven straight backed uncomfortable looking chairs that had been arranged in front of her desk. Ron and Hermione sat down first, in the two chairs in the middle.

'Mr. Potter, if you please, I'd like to have all my prefects sitting together,' said Professor McGonagall an unreadable expression on her face as she indicated to a seat to the far side of the desk

practically next to her. Harry noted that the chair he was sitting in definitely was more comfortable than it looked.

'Come in,' Professor McGonagall called out as someone knocked on the door. Seeing that the other prefects had arrived by then she said crisply, 'you are late. Sit down quickly so we can start. I want to get this over with so I can enjoy my Sunday. And yes, Mr. Weasley, we teachers do have a life outside teaching.' She said the last bit upon spotting and correctly interpreting the look of momentary surprise on Ron's face, causing the red head to blush.

As the other prefects sat down, Harry wondered if there was any significance to having all the prefects situated together right in front of professor McGonagall with Ron and Hermione flanked by the seventh and fifth year prefects with him seated to the side, almost facing them.

'Now first order of business, I want your written reports for the week, so if you please?' her voice trailed off expectantly. In response, all the other prefects pulled out a sheet of parchment.

'Mr. Weasley, where is your report?' Professor McGonagall asked when Ron didn't hand his in, the glint in her eyes as she asked the question belied the casual tone that she used.

Ron gulped. The last time he had seen that kind of a glint was in Bellatrix's eyes when Harry had insulted Voldemort in front of her.

'Er- I-left it behind in the dorm' he said hurriedly as sweat broke out on his forehead.

'Sorry? Do repeat yourself Weasley, I didn't quite catch that.' Said McGonagall, however, the look in her eyes suggested that she had, in fact, caught what Ron had said.

Harry felt a bit of sympathy for his friend as the ginger sat there practically sweating blood. Of course, that sympathy did not extend to helping him out. McGonagall was scary. And that was on an average day. Right now, with her lips having nearly vanished and her nostrils flared she looked positively demonic as she looked at a squirming Ron looking remarkably like the Hungarian Horntail that Harry had faced in his fourth year. He should know ... he had the model on his bedside table.

'Um, I, er, didn't get it professor,' said Ron hesitantly. 'You see, I forgot it 'cause I was in a hurry-' he stuttered to a halt as the expression on Professor McGonagall got stormier and stormier to the point that if Hagrid had walked in right now, he might have thought that his dreams had come true and that the Headmaster had finally let a dragon in the school.

'You mean to tell me Mr. Weasley that you forgot to get your report, despite having been told that there was going to be a meeting of all the prefects today, and that too when I told you last night?' Her voice turned deadly at this point.

'Um, I was busy looking for Harry to tell him about the meeting, ma'am. Both Hermione and I were searching for ages! We only found him a few minutes back! So because of that I forgot to get the report.' Ron rambled on defensively, his ears going red.

Professor McGonagall looked at Ron for a minute, her expression not changing one bit, 'Mr. Weasley, do you take me for a fool? I have been teaching in this school for nearly thirty years now, and I have even taught your parents when they were students themselves. I can see from your still damp hair that you just recently finished your bath. I also did not see you in the Great Hall despite the fact that I was there for nearly two hours. I also know for a fact that you haven't even had breakfast judging by the sounds your stomach is making. If you truly had been up early enough, you would have had the time to dress properly, know that Mr. Potter wasn't in the Gryffindor tower, and have come for breakfast. In fact, you would also have been able to have a proper bath.' Ron opened his mouth, but Professor McGonagall cut him off, 'I can see the drying soap suds under your collar, Weasley.'

Hermione and Harry were the only ones who didn't snicker at this. Hermione was shooting Ron looks of disapproval, while Harry was using all the training he had gone through over the years with the Dursleys along with his Occlumency skills to keep his face straight. He was only partially successful however, for his eyes were twinkling in mirth. His task was made even harder when he remembered the last time he had to sit there with a straight face and not laugh his arse off was when Dudley had first put on his Smeltings uniform all those years back.

'Do you even have a report made, Mr. Weasley?' growled Professor McGonagall after a minute of considering the boy in front of her after giving a quelling look at the tittering fifth- and seventh-years. 'I thought so,' the look on Ron's face was enough to answer that question. 'So you couldn't even be bothered to write a few lines about the patrols you do for the week, Weasley?' Her voice cut through the room making all the students within cringe on reflex. 'I cannot believe that a Gryffindor prefect would shirk his or her duty. Especially now with the way things are going. I am utterly disappointed with you.'

She turned her baleful gaze upon the other prefects, making even the burly seventh year prefect gulp. Her lips had completely vanished by this point, 'And that brings me to the second part of this meeting and why I called all of you and Mr. Potter.' Professor McGonagall fixed her stare at Harry upon mentioning him, startling him. Harry hesitantly returned the smile she sent his way, taken off guard by the suddenness of the change in expression on the older woman's face.

Her face hardened again as she looked around the room again. 'Yesterday, when I had my first meeting with my Muggleborn first-year Gryffindors, I was told a rather interesting story. It was so interesting that I actually had to call in the other first-years to corroborate what I had been told.' She pinned the fifth-year prefects with her glare.

'Ms. Eastchurch, could you run through the tasks you were given on the night of the first?'

The girl who had given Harry the password to the Gryffindor Tower on the night after the Welcoming Feast spoke up hesitantly, thrown by the sudden change in topic. 'Well ma'am, after the Feast, Fitzpatrick and I went to patrol the seventh floor, just as we had been instructed to do. We did not find anything suspicious.' The other prefect nodded vigorously at this

'I see,' said McGonagall. 'What were your duties for that evening, Mr. Connor?' she addressed the seventh-year prefect.

'Sarah and I had been instructed to go help the caretaker sort out any contraband or dark objects that had been detected and confiscated from the incoming students, professor. We were also

supposed to help if any further searches were needed. Aside from the odd mildly cursed item, nothing serious was found. Additionally the wards hadn't been tripped when the first-years came in so there wasn't any need to carry out additional searches. As there wasn't anything left for us to do, the two of us left for the Tower. Naturally, ma'am, we cleared it with Mr. Filch and confirmed that there wasn't anything else we were needed for before leaving.' His long experience with the Transfiguration teacher and Deputy Headmistress was the reason why he tacked the last bit on. He knew that she would ask that one question.

Harry was still lost. He wasn't the only one however as the others around him were just as confused as he was. Hermione was mustering up the courage to ask Professor McGonagall the reason for the meeting when the Professor herself spoke up.

'I see,' she said sternly, 'Mr. Connor, were you present at the debriefing that took place in the train ride here?'

'Yes, ma'am' replied the seventh-year cautiously.

'And was every one of this house's prefects present then?'

'Yes, Professor'

'Also, as seventh-year prefect you were given the list of duties for Gryffindor house's prefects, which you then delegated to the fifth- and sixth-year prefects?'

'Yes ma'am.'

'And I understand that the other years had volunteered to carry out the tasks that were on the list first before you could hand them out?'

Looking as if he was wondering where she was going with it the prefect replied with another, 'Yes ma'am'

'Good then. Now, can you tell me who volunteered to escort the first-years up to their dorm?' said McGonagall. The casual tone in her voice was in direct contradiction to the steely glint in her eyes.

The whole room went silent at this, a look of dread started to fill Ron and Hermione's face, while the fifth-year prefects had a look of

dawning understanding and hidden glee on theirs. The seventh-years were the only two who did not understand the significance of the question. Harry finally saw where this was going and although his face was carefully neutral, he was rejoicing underneath.

Now Harry didn't really mind escorting the moppets to their dorm. Despite them being a royal pain and extremely cheeky at first, they were likeable enough when they had calmed down a bit. Besides, he really liked the way they insisted on saying 'Sir,' and 'Mr. Potter,' when addressing him even though at times it made him feel really old.

But he did resent having to do the work without any of the perks or benefits. A part of him was still stung over the snub of being passed over for Ron Weasley for that position. Screw Dumbledore's reasoning. So Harry really did not appreciate being made to do their work for them. He was not their fag, nor was he selected for the position. Ron was made the prefect, not Harry. So why should Harry shoulder any of the responsibilities?

After all, didn't Dumbledore say that he had passed Harry over because Harry had enough responsibilities? Harry was initially sorely tempted to just leave the first years behind in the Great Hall in a bid to send a message that he wasn't going to take any responsibilities he wasn't supposed to take, but then that would make the first-years suffer. And Harry wasn't that heartless to let innocent children suffer for the actions of others. He had enough of that growing up and with Snape.

'Um, if I recall correctly, the sixth year Gryffindor prefects were supposed to do that,' said Connor slowly. 'But you know all this ... ma'am.' He faltered at the last moment as Professor McGonagall levelled a stare (lowered to an eagle level glare) at him.

'Oh, I did know of this Mr. Connor, I just wanted to ensure that everyone here knew what they were doing,' said Professor McGonagall, still sounding casual, 'Because, that would help me understand why on earth the first-years were escorted to their dorms by someone who wasn't a prefect!' She bit out the last few words as she fixed Ron and Hermione with a glare so intense that it had reached basilisk level, surpassing her previous record of dragon-level.

'Well?' she snapped out into the uncomfortable silence after nobody spoke up. 'Nothing to say, Mr. Weasley?' she asked as she looked at Ron who shrank back in his seat. 'Ms. Granger?' for once, the bushy haired girl was speechless as she also shrunk back from the baleful stare sent her way.

She rounded on the fifth-years, 'I understand that Mr. Potter had directed the first-years to you when he couldn't find the sixth-year prefects, Ms. Eastchurch? Why didn't you and Mr. Fitzpatrick take up the job instead of giving Mr. Potter the password and moving off? Surely it wouldn't have been that much of a stretch to carry on with your patrol after escorting the new students to their dorms?'

'Um,' the poor girl clearly wasn't expecting to be in the firing range. 'I-I thought that it would've been better for us to go and patrol the seventh floor as soon and as early as possible ... and the firsties wanted Potter to take them there!'

Professor McGonagall wasn't impressed, 'so you mean to tell me that you would be willing to jump into the lake stark naked in the middle of February and then attend all of your classes without your clothes on, if, as you say, "the firsties", asked you? Sweet Merlin, girl! You are the prefect! At least act like you have a backbone!'

'Please professor,' inserted her fellow prefect. 'We had no idea where Weasley and Granger had disappeared off to. And we thought that it would've been better to just follow the orders we were given. My Grandfather always said that the best thing a soldier could do was follow the orders he was given. And he was a soldier himself!'

'And that brings me back to the original point of this meeting,' said McGonagall turning to Ron and Hermione not breaking her stride. 'Imagine my shock when I find out from the new students that they had been escorted up to their dorms not by my sixth-year prefects, or any of the house prefects for that matter, but by one of our other students.' she paused for a while just to watch them squirm before snapping out, 'Where were the two of you that night?'

'Um, well professor, we're sorry that we didn't escort the first-years to the dorms,' began Hermione. 'But we thought we saw someone acting suspicious and decided to investigate. By that time, we heard

that the first-years had already been taken care of.'

Professor McGonagall raised her eyebrows at this, 'a "suspicious person" you say?' Hermione nodded, while Ron said 'yes Professor,' clearly thinking that they would be let off the hook. He couldn't have been more wrong. 'Well, then why am I hearing about this now?' said Professor McGonagall, her frosty tones becoming even colder. 'It isn't in your report,' she said as she picked Hermione's report and examined it. 'Perhaps it is in that nonexistent report that you claim to have left behind in the dorms, Mr. Weasley?' she said archly when Hermione failed to respond.

Ron flushed at this, 'I did make that report, ma'am.' He said slightly resentfully.

'Really? Then I'm sure you won't mind bringing it down from the dorms. It will only take five minutes. I certainly can wait that long. I am sure the others won't mind waiting either,' said Professor McGonagall challengingly. Seeing Ron make no move to get up, she said expectantly, 'Well, we're waiting, Mr. Weasley.'

'It isn't fully completed yet,' Ron hedged instead. He had meant to make the report up and give it, but things kept happening and one thing led to another and before he knew it, Saturday had come up and he hadn't completed it. When Professor McGonagall had postponed the meeting, Ron had been ecstatic. He thought that he would get up bright and early on Sunday and be able to complete the report by nine. He certainly hadn't meant to sleep in.

Professor McGonagall only snorted at this. 'So when will it be completed by, Weasley?' she said sarcastically, 'If and when you finally leave school the next year?'

Not expecting a response from the now blushing boy, she addressed the entire room. 'I never have been so disappointed with the whole lot of you! Not only did my sixth-year prefects fail to do the tasks that they had volunteered for, but my fifth-year prefects couldn't be bothered to take up the slack! I would suppose that the seventh-year prefects could be let off the hook, but then I hear that even they haven't bothered to help the new students out!'

She swept them with another glare, 'Being a prefect is not a privilege, it is a responsibility! It isn't all about taking points or handing out detentions but also about being there for the younger years! I don't even know why I am repeating myself when you lot,' she indicated to the sixth and seventh-years, 'should have known this by now! I also expected you to tell your juniors and the new prefects the same thing, despite having given them the same speech!'

'And not only that,' she continued in the same venomous tones. 'But you have the gall to hide this from me! Why hadn't you reported Ms. Granger and Mr. Weasley missing?' She snapped the last question off to the fifth-years.

'And also, why were the first-years all running around lost the first day back? Weren't you supposed to be showing them the way? Was it not your responsibility to do that much? I know that it isn't written in the rule book, and I don't really expect it out of my seventh-years, but the fifth- and sixth-year prefects could have done that at least. So why haven't you?' she fairly shouted.

After a long moment of hesitation, the fifth-year, Fitzpatrick spoke up, 'Well professor, the two of us were going to do that, but by that time, the first-years had already started flocking towards Potter over here asking him questions about their schoolwork and about the directions to the other classes. So we thought that it would be better to leave things the way they were.'

Professor McGonagall's face didn't change one bit, indeed she was seething inside at this. So they decide to go around and pretend as if nothing was happening? Just because one student volunteered to do something they were required as prefects to do? She thought furiously. Just then, inspiration struck her as she started speaking 'Yes, indeed, Mr. Potter here has done far more than you lot. All the new students I have met have all been filled with tales of how he has helped them with their work and in finding their way around the castle. In fact, from what reports from various sources tell me, he has also seen to helping the first years of the other houses as well whenever they ask him a question if their house prefects are not around.'

'My initial reaction to hearing about this was to replace you with Mr. Potter, Weasley.' Ron blanched on hearing this. 'However, the

headmaster managed to convince me otherwise, by pointing out that it was not enough grounds to remove a prefect. He also pointed out that this would necessitate the removal of the other prefects as well, since all of you are equally guilty here one way or another.'

'In light of this, I have thought long and hard and have come to this conclusion.' She had just come up with this, but they really didn't need to know that. Taking a deep breath and hoping that this worked, she continued.

'The position of House Captain hasn't been conferred on a student for a long while now. That was mainly due to the drop of the student population that Hogwarts had experienced recently. In the fifties, it was decided that the six prefects would be more than adequate for the job with the Head Boy and Girl taking care of the organisation of the different house clubs. However,' she opened a drawer in her desk and rummaged around for a bit. 'Due to the work you have done recently in helping out the first-years as well as taking care of some of the responsibilities that the prefects should have been doing, Mr. Potter, I have decided to give you that position.' Finally finding it she extricated a scarlet badge embossed with the Gryffindor Lion in gold with a thin golden C surrounding the animal on one side.

She held the badge out towards Harry while silently ordering the boy to take it without asking any questions.

It seemed that Harry had read her intentions correctly as he took the badge without any complaint, looking at her squarely in the eye all the while only breaking eye contact as he pinned the badge next to the scarlet and gold Quidditch Captain's badge, which, unlike the House Captain's badge, had a pair of broomsticks crossed with each other with the Quidditch four balls between the handles superimposed on the Gryffindor Lion.

Good boy, Professor McGonagall thought. Smiling, she said briskly, 'Congratulations on your promotion, Mr. Potter. I will make the announcement tonight in the Gryffindor common room.' said Professor McGonagall. 'We will discuss your responsibilities in detail later. For now, know that you will be sharing some of the responsibilities that the other prefects claim to be too busy to do.' she gave all the occupants in the room one last glare before dismissing them.

'Mr. Potter, stay back for a moment.'

Wondering what she wanted, the newly minted Gryffindor House Captain sat down in front of his head of house while the others filed out as quickly as possible, wanting to get away as soon as possible. They did not want to find out if the Scot could actually breathe fire.

Telling him to have a biscuit, the old battle-axe leaned back in her chair and, exhaling softly, said, 'Thank you for accepting the position without any fuss, Potter. That was rather commendable of you.'

Harry raised his eyebrows, 'So you had actually thought of the whole thing at that very moment!' he exclaimed.

'You would be right Potter.' said Professor McGonagall as she opened her eyes and looked at him with none of her usual sternness present. 'The headmaster overruled my initial decision of sacking Mr. Weasley and putting you in his stead. So I had to think of an alternative method to teach them a lesson. This was the best I could come up with. I would appreciate it if you didn't share that with the others.'

'I don't think I like being singled out like that just so you can teach a bunch of my schoolmates a lesson,' said Harry slowly.

'Oh don't worry Mr. Potter, I will ensure that you earn that badge. You will be one busy little boy indeed! Besides, making you House Captain gives me the leeway to assign more patrols to the prefects.' As Harry opened his mouth to protest at that she continued, 'Also, I wouldn't complain too much Mr. Potter. In fact, if I were you, I would be thankful that this is all that I am doing.'

'What do you mean professor?'

'Oh, let's just say that if you were to complain or whine about your new position or responsibilities, I just might remember something else I learnt from the first-years,' said Professor McGonagall as she looked over her spectacles at Harry. 'Like the fact that a certain someone told the first-years that I habitually transfigure students into various animals as a punishment.' She fixed him with a stern look, her eyes narrowed and lips thin.

Harry couldn't help but blush at that. 'Ah, you um, heard about that, professor?' he said at a vain attempt at being casual.

'Yes, Mr. Potter, I did. Do you know how terrified those Muggleborns were when I had called them over to my office? The poor mites were positively quaking in their shoes! They were nearly in tears by the time they had come to my office!' Professor McGonagall exclaimed.

Seeing that there was no reply coming from her new House Captain, she continued on, 'I cannot believe that you would lie like that! You certainly are lucky that the headmaster has discouraged corporal punishment in this school Mr. Potter. Otherwise believe me when I say that you would be bent over right now receiving six of the best from my cane.' Harry flinched at that comment.

'Well Professor, technically I hadn't said that you transfigure students. I just mentioned that I had seen you change a student back from a ferret. And that the same student had been bounced quite a few times before you had reversed the transfiguration,' Harry said quickly, mounting the defence he had been working on since last night. 'I guess in hindsight I should have worded my sentence differently. I certainly didn't mean to make them think that you transfigured students as a punishment!' he said with as much remorse he could manage, bowing his head and making his eyes as wide and innocent as possible, portraying the image of a very sorry schoolboy indeed.

Despite her best efforts, Professor McGonagall's lips twitched. That expression was so like his father's, and the green eyes of his mother's only served to enhance the effect. She was also sure that she saw a bit of Sirius in there too. She would've been able to deal with either of the three of them individually, but with all three together clumped in one package ... she couldn't find it within herself to stay angry. Besides, never in her entire career had she experienced the novelty of such a quiet and unfailingly polite batch of first-years. They were more afraid of her than they were of Severus!

'Well, Mr. Potter, do see that it doesn't happen again,' she said dryly. Innocent, heart melting expression or not, she had enough experience to know that the rascal was putting on an act. 'Or you will be feeling what six of the best can do to you!'

'You wouldn't,' Harry gasped the last bit out. He was certain that she was joking, but the tone of her voice was too serious for him to be sure.

'You're right, I wouldn't.' She paused for effect, 'I would increase it to nine, and your trousers and pants would be around your ankles.' She smirked at the blush that brought up, 'After all, while the headmaster may have discouraged caning, it isn't against the school rules. Or I just might transfigure you into a fluffy little kitten for the weekend and hand you over to the girls to play with.' She said sweetly, 'after all, it wouldn't do to have the Gryffindor House Captain be called a liar now, would it?'

Harry's face turned white at the threat. Inwardly he cursed himself. He should have made sure that the firsties didn't say anything. Those midgets really had big mouths on them!

'Now, Potter, off with you. I'll see you in class on Monday.'

As he opened the door to exit her office a thought occurred to Harry. Turning his head around to face his head of house, he asked suspiciously. 'Professor, what did you mean when you said "that it wouldn't do to have the Gryffindor House Captain be called a liar,"?' Suddenly working out what that meant, he asked incredulously, 'Does that mean that you haven't set the first-years straight professor?' Seeing Professor McGonagall reach for her wand, he hastily exited and closed the door. He didn't want another stinging hex sent his way, nor did he want to risk being transfigured.

Just to be sure, Harry made it a point to get as far away from Professor McGonagall's office as possible.

As soon as he was a safe distance away, Harry shook his head. He really hadn't seen that coming. Who'd have thought that McGonagall was as Slytherin as they came? When she had held out the badge to him, he had picked up the order she had sent his way via her thoughts, as well as a warning that he wouldn't like the consequences. He hadn't dug in further at that time to figure out what those consequences were, since he could detect the mental walls that were just lurking beneath the surface of those thoughts. Professor McGonagall apparently was one of the few who knew the art of Occlumency.

He wasn't too worried about the threats she had made. The fact that she hadn't bothered to refute the rumours that Harry had started combined with the fact that she had made him the first House Captain in fifty years proved that. Not that he was going to try and push his luck.

Checking the time, and seeing that it was lunch, he made his way to the Great Hall where he was joined almost immediately by Susan, Hannah, Justin, Kevin and Terry as soon as he sat down at the Gryffindor table next to Neville.

'So what did McGonagall want with you lot? The other prefects aren't talking for some reason.' And with that question from Susan, the inquisition began.

Harry was forced to recount what had happened in Professor McGonagall's office (minus the tête-à-tête he had after the prefects had left) three times before he was allowed to eat his lunch in peace. By the time he had finished, half the school knew about it.

Deciding that he needed to get away from it for the time being, Harry excused himself and finding a discreet location donned his Cloak and slipped back through the open doors into the Great Hall which was now mostly empty.

Slipping into the antechamber, he quickly opened up the passageway to the Chamber of Secrets. As soon as he was in the Chamber proper, he called his elves to him.

With a 'crack' that echoed off the empty room, Randolph, Dobby and Winky appeared together greeting their master.

'Right, you lot. I want that basilisk harvested for any parts that can be sold commercially or utilized. From what research I have done, that would mean its venom, heart, fangs, eyes, liver, blood and hide. After you render it down, I'll then decide what needs to be sold, and what we should keep for ourselves. The rest should be vanished.' Seeing them nod, he continued, 'After you are done with that, I want you to cast some air freshening charms on the place. Also, I want the place cleaned up as well.' All three elves replied with a 'yes master.'

Smiling, Harry sent Dobby and Winky off to work on the basilisk.

Addressing Randolph, he said, 'How is the team of elves you sent to repair the cave-in progressing.'

'They have made an initial assessment of the area sir,' said Randolph respectfully. 'Most of the stonework can be reused in repairing the place, but there is much material that needs to be replaced outright. I have set them to work on repairing the cave-in using the existing materials for now. But soon we will need to buy stone to replace the bits too damaged to be repaired by magic.'

Harry took a moment to ponder this. Sure he had more than enough money to buy the materials without it being a strain for him. The problem was that he was then going to be doing extra work on Hogwarts without the headmaster's permission. Soon he decided to go ahead with it. He figured that he owned half the castle anyway, what with being the heir of two founders. Besides, it wasn't as if anyone knew of the place or the tunnel to begin with.

His decision made, Harry said, 'Do you have the authority to search for and negotiate with the right companies?'

'Yes sir, as the head elf, I am able to do so as long as the Master gives his permission in form of a letter.'

'Very well, on Monday I want you to scout for the relevant companies and give me their names and addresses. I only want the best of the best. After you give me the list I'll write the letters so you can obtain the quotations. For now, supervise those two and ensure they don't kill each other.' Harry looked at the two elves that now were clad in miniature dragon hide armour and wielding long goblin made knives. 'I hope they behave the next day when you aren't around,' he muttered under his breath.

'Actually sir, I might have a solution for that. I just heard that Kreacher is good at taxidermy as well. He was trained by his parents in the art of stuffing house-elf heads for the House of Black. Randolph cannot believe that he forgot about that!' the elf muttered underneath his breath.

'It's fine Randolph. At least you remembered at the last minute,' said Harry consolingly.

'Master is too kind' the elf muttered as Harry summoned a much cleaner Kreacher and set him the task of helping with the basilisk.

The elf stood goggle-eyed as he saw the basilisk that Harry said that he had killed himself before muttering, 'Master is a powerful wizard to have been able to kill such a strong beast. Kreacher thinks that the head will make a fine addition to the house like the umbrella stand old master Sagittarius made from the leg of the troll he killed. Yes he does!'

'Now there's a good idea Kreacher!' said Harry. 'After you drain the venom from the fangs, and remove the eyes, stuff the head, replace the gouged eyes with imitations and create a plaque to mount it. We'll figure out where to put it later.'

The house elf beamed at the compliment Harry sent his way, and with an excited 'yes master!' joined the other elves.

Suddenly spotting something near the basilisk, Harry darted forward. Bending down, he picked up a solitary fang that was laying a few ways away from the corpse that was now being processed. This was the fang that had pierced his skin all those years ago. Harry looked at the thing that had come really close to killing him in fascination. It wasn't everyday that one gets to hold the very thing that nearly ended their life.

For some reason, Harry felt a pull towards this particular fang. Frowning, he pocketed it. He had a vague idea on what to do with that fang.

Deciding to leave the elves to do their job, Harry left the Chamber and headed towards the school. He needed to hurry otherwise getting out into the Great Hall would pose a bit of a problem seeing as he would be coming out directly behind the staff table.

He reached the Hall with plenty of time to spare. Hurrying up to the Gryffindor tower, he was just in time for Professor McGonagall's announcement which she had appeared a few minutes after him to give.

Harry soon found out what his new position entailed. By the next day, Professor McGonagall had managed to dig out an old handbook

detailing the duties and powers of the House Captain. As House Captain, Harry was essentially above the prefects and just below the Head Boy and Girl, meaning that the House Prefects had to report to him. He had to hand out and coordinate the prefects' patrol duties, (something they found had increased almost overnight) as well as review what detentions they had meted out along with any points they had taken or given. If any of the students in the house had an issue with the detentions, they also had to take it up with their House Captain.

Thankfully, Harry managed to smooth out any resentment the prefects had towards him by mentioning that Professor McGonagall had all but threatened him into accepting the position. He may or may not have used his talents in persuading them.

Another thing Harry had to do was approve of the activities of the different clubs and societies that were either in Gryffindor House or headed by a Gryffindor. And that he found annoying as well as entertaining: Annoying, because all of the various club leaders were rather nitpicky, and entertaining because most of them were girls who were rather over the moon with him for one reason or another.

Though, Harry decided as he sat through a five minute meeting a few days later (that was taking ages!) he could do without the fawning of two certain siblings with the last name Creevey. It figured that Colin was the head of the Photographic Society. The hyperactive fifth-year was practically married to that camera of his. He was probably born with it in his hand. Harry amused himself with images of a newborn Colin Creevey taking a picture of his parents' and nurse's surprised faces the minute he was born ... ('Where did that camera come from?') or the look on Mrs. Creevey's face when one year old Colin spit up baby food in her face. It helped in keeping a pleasant smile on his face ... and moderated his mounting desire to throttle the kid. And Dennis was ... Harry frowned, he had no idea what Dennis was doing there to begin with. He jerked out of his daydream. 'Yeah, Colin,' he said, mentally thanking all the deities out there for his skill at Legilimency, 'Good idea. You go ahead and do that. Just ensure that you ask for permission if you are taking pictures of individuals. Perhaps if you offer to give them a copy they might not mind. Now if there is nothing else? Good. Bye!' With that he got up to leave.

Merlin I hate that woman. He thought as he left to go somewhere nice and quiet. Stupid vindictive Scot!

To top it all, he also found himself sitting and helping the younger years every evening. Initially he had no problem with it. But that was when he wasn't obligated to help them. Now ... it was a chore.

At least the upshot of it was that the other Heads were thinking of following Professor McGonagall's footsteps. At least that way, he would have some company in his misery.

It was near the end of the week when he was preparing to go to sleep that he suddenly realised that the thoughts he had read in Professor McGonagall's mind had been sent to him! She bleeding knew! He thought with sudden realisation as he abruptly sat back up in bed. Stupid vindictive Scot...

The bit about Myrtle shagging a living person was inspired by this utterly horrible (and eye gouging) fic I read a long time back that had a Myrtle and Harry pairing ... with Lemons! *shudder*

Anyway, I thank Miss Lalla for helping me with the chapter! You should check her story out it's brill!

Read and Review

Before you read this chapter, I have some bad news ... unfortunately this is going to be the last chapter of the story ... yes I am going to abandon it ... I've run out of ideas!

On that note: APRIL FOOLS! HA HA!

Bet I had you going!

In case you were wondering why I am pulling an April Fools prank on the 10th of April and not on April Fools Day, well, it is because everybody expects an April Fools prank on the first ... tremble at the brilliance of my diabolical mind!

Anyway, enjoy the chapter that I managed to type despite spraining my left thumb (I'm left handed, so an injury there makes even shaving and brushing teeth hard!)

Saturday morning dawned with an overcast sky, a lot of wind and a light drizzle. Normally on such a day, people would be lying in bed or staying indoors. However, had anybody in the castle looked out of the window, they would have seen the figures of Neville Longbottom, Susan Bones, Hannah Abbot and Harry Potter running across the grounds and battling the wind.

'This is getting ridiculous,' said a windswept Neville. He was sure that had the wind been any stronger, he would have been blown off course into the lake.

'Yeah, I think I'll catch my death of cold there if we continue running outside,' said Susan to which Hannah agreed with a nod.

'It's just a bit of rain and wind,' Harry told his friends nonchalantly.

'What?' he asked his friends, upon noticing the looks the other three were giving him.

'A bit of rain and wind'? A bit?' Susan looked at Harry as if he was crazy. 'Are you mad?'

'What are you talking about? It wasn't so bad,' said Harry defensively. As he was talking, a strong gust of wind rattled the window panes of the corridor they were in. 'I've had much worse at Quidditch practice. And that's when we're flying.'

'That explains it,' Hannah sighed while Susan muttered under her breath imprecations on Quidditch players and what she thought of their mental health. The girls looked at him sadly and for the remainder of the morning till they left for their dorms, Harry had to endure a lot of mock-pitying looks and good-natured ribbing about the state of his mental health.

Done with his classes for the morning (which was partly spent getting on Astoria's nerves, though the girl was quite good at holding her own), Harry headed out towards the Quidditch pitch.

Quite a few people had put their names down to try out for the Gryffindor Quidditch team and it was Harry's job as captain to select those who were the most competent and form a team that would lead Gryffindor into a Quidditch victory, bringing home the cup for the third time in a row since Harry had come to play, and keeping Professor McGonagall happy for another year. The last bit was especially important to Harry as it meant that there was one less chance of the Scot taking out her family's claymore, which he had noticed on the wall behind her desk, and charging at him while raining spells down from her wand ... Or worse, turning him into a fluffy kitten.

Looking at the rather long list in his hand, Harry massaged his forehead with his fingers. At first when Professor McGonagall had given him the list, he had wondered why the Gryffindor team had become so popular. However a look at the names showed him how mistaken he was. Judging by the number of females there, it proved that it wasn't the team that was popular, it was Harry. It definitely explained the amused look on Professor McGonagall's face he thought he had seen as she handed the list to him.

Walking out into the pitch with his Firebolt in hand and a whistle hanging from his neck, Harry spotted the large crowd of hopefuls for the team. He let out a long suffering sigh; this is going to take some time he thought.

And he was right. A good chunk of those present turned out to be from the other houses. Rabid Fan Girls, Harry thought in disgust as they left the pitch, giggling all the way. Getting an idea, he blew the whistle around his neck putting on his most authoritative look as he told them to get a move on. He was rewarded with some

entertainment as one half of the girls swooned at the image he was presenting while the other half were left pretty senseless with the amount of giggling they were doing.

The rest of the selection process didn't go that well. He had to find the most diplomatic way to tell the first-years that they weren't selected for the team without reducing them to tears, which was much harder than it looked mainly because of the amount of hope they had shining in their eyes. Though Harry had to give it to them, they had put on a good effort, even if most of them didn't have much experience flying. Some of them had the potential to be great with some training, as he took care to tell them. Harry really had to control himself though when he saw one of them crash into the goalposts, being so surprised at staying airborne for so long. Merlin that was funny!

He almost immediately ordered back the second group of people. They were the Gryffindor contingent of the Rabid Fan Girls. Harry watched with some annoyance as they went back up the stands and started heckling the other hopefuls. Maybe he should have insisted that they leave altogether.

In the end, after two hours, Harry had for himself three Chasers, two Beaters and a headache. Katie was as usual in top form, Ginny was, as expected, quite a brilliant flier and Demelza Robins, a new find, had quite a bit of promise. Jimmy Peaks and Ritchie Coote, his new Beaters may not have the brilliance of Fred and George Weasley, but they were pretty good in their own way. They certainly had made an impression on Harry, partly being responsible for the headache he now had and fully responsible for the lump he was nursing.

Now all he had to do was find a Keeper. He looked at the stands that were now almost filled with students from other houses along with the rejected players and felt his head give another throb. The lump that he currently had on the back of his head did not help matters.

Eventually Ron ended up returning to the team. Harry was certainly grateful. It meant that Cormac McLaggen didn't get the spot, as Harry coolly told him with expertly concealed relish. Additionally it also meant that he now had some blackmail material on his bushy haired best friend. Harry had noticed the Confundus Charm that she had sent McLaggen's way even if everyone else hadn't. That was

rather naughty of her, he thought. At least it would stop her from harping on and on about the Potions book he had.

Not that it really mattered. Harry had, in a sudden burst of inspiration, bought two new Potions books. He had given one back to Slughorn, claiming that it was a replacement for the old book which had been tragically destroyed in an accident. The other he had kept for appearance's sake in class while slowly and steadily filling that book in with the additional instructions and corrections from the Prince's copy. He was also looking into ways to make it seem that the annotations that he had made looked like the words printed by the author so that certain people didn't notice at first glance. Till then he was pretending to have made the annotations after having deeply studied the potion ahead of time.

Harry had also found a few spells of questionable origin on the margins of the book. Those he copied into a notebook to study and test out later. As soon as he squeezed out every last drop of information from the book, he planned to arrange for that "tragic accident" he had told Slughorn about.

Once the trials were over and the team selected, Harry, Ron, and Hermione spent another few hours first cajoling Hagrid and soothing his ruffled feathers as the half-giant was pretty miffed that not one of them had signed up for his N.E.W.T. class and then consoling him after he revealed that he was worried about Aragog's health, reassuring him that yes, they too would miss the elephant sized, blind, man-eating, arachnid and no, they did not hold it against the spider when he and his legions of children had tried to eat two of them. After all, what is a bit of attempted murder between a friend and a friend of a friend? Thankfully Hagrid didn't catch the insincerity in those remarks.

Harry spent supper with Ron and Hermione silently letting the girl know that he knew what she had done. Once finished, he made his excuses and after making sure that he was alone, headed towards the Chamber.

His surprise promotion had set his plans for the Chamber back by a few days, and now that he was free, he planned to use it.

Reaching the Chamber proper, Harry checked on the elves' progress. Seeing that they would be done by the end of the day, he

took the quotations handed to him by Randolph which sent by some repair companies for the materials which would be needed to repair the cave-in and the Chamber itself for review.

Looking through them, he chose a company and resolved to have the letter written as soon as possible.

When he was on his way out, Harry stopped at the antechamber. He thoughtfully looked at the two archways on either side of the outwards-leading tunnel. The way they were set, facing opposite each other and exactly at right angles to the entrance and exit tunnels, was interesting. If one looked at it, if the two archways were actual tunnels, the four exits would resemble the four points of a compass.

Remembering what the goblins had told him a long time back, Harry went to the archway to his left to examine it, placing his palm flat against the centre of the surface in order to feel for any carvings or irregularities his eyes might miss. However, as soon as his hand came into contact with the surface of the stone, it became stuck in place.

Harry had a moment of panic when his hand refused to budge. After some useless tugging he calmed down to think. OK, so pulling is not working, looks like I will have to find another way, he thought.

He didn't need to think much longer as at that moment, he felt a stinging sensation in his hand. The stonework then momentarily flashed white before reverting to its original colour, freeing Harry's hand.

Blinking back the spots and recovering his vision after a moment, Harry looked down at his palm. The stinging sensation he had felt a few moments back was gone, replaced by a phantom pain that shortly subsided. Frowning at his unmarked palm, he looked back at the archway.

The stone was no longer dusty looking. It seemed that the flash of light (or was it a pulse of magic) had erased away centuries of dirt, leaving a gleaming grey stone wall that looked as if it had been just built there yesterday.

However the most distinguishing feature of the wall was the large engraving of a snake that dominated it.

Sucking in a breath, Harry looked at the snake. Going on a hunch, he said 'open'. The snake was so lifelike and intricately made that it wasn't much of a strain to say the words in Parseltongue.

With a slight grinding noise the wall underneath the archway (which Harry now realised had a strange set of carvings on them) sunk slowly inwards and then slid to the right, leaving an empty dark entrance for Harry to step through.

Lighting his wand and looking around cautiously, Harry stepped through the entrance. As soon as he was through, the stone wall slid back into place with a thud leaving him in total darkness but for the light coming from his wand.

The darkness didn't last for long as with a hiss, ancient torches came to life, along with a long dormant lighting charm, bathing Harry's surroundings in white light.

Blinking at the sudden influx of light, Harry extinguished his wand, and still holding it aloft, looked around. What he saw nearly made him drop his wand.

The first thing he noticed in the cavernous room he now found himself in was the small piles of Galleons, Sickles and Knuts. However, those piles were dwarfed by the pyramids of gold and silver ingots that were all just about as wide as they were tall, while being just about Harry's height. Looking closer, Harry found out that all the ingots were stamped with what he assumed was the Slytherin coat of arms; an ornate serpentine S just like in the locket he had seen in that memory.

The pyramids of precious metals weren't the only major feature of the vault (for it could be nothing else but the Slytherin vault). In small little niches carved into the wall, Harry could find small piles of glittering diamonds, glimmering emeralds, and glowing rubies. There were also a few pieces of jewellery there too. Mainly rings, necklaces and the like. Nothing too fancy unlike the locket Harry had seen in Bob Ogden's memory.

A closer look at the coins revealed that they were not the modern day Galleons, Sickles and Knuts Harry was so used to. This looked to be the ancient variant, the edges not the perfect circle of Harry's coins. However, Harry noticed that the profile on the face of the coin was the same. Shrugging, Harry looked around to the other side of the room, his back to the Slytherin Family Fortune.

On the opposite side was a treasure of another kind. Set in a bookcase were twelve volumes of thick hardbound books, still in pristine condition, even if the materials used to make them were of a different make. Harry noticed that the books were actually made of paper instead of parchment. True the paper was not the thin modern Muggle version, but it still was paper.

Harry eagerly opened one of the books. Who knows what ancient arcane knowledge was written there?

However, he was soon to be disappointed. The book he had opened was written in a language of which the only thing Harry could make out was that it wasn't a European language. It certainly wasn't even close to the runes he had been learning.

Putting the book back, Harry did a systematic check of the other books, starting from the bottom right up to the top left. Sure enough each and every one of the books was written in the same script.

It was with a sense of deep disappointment that Harry opened the last book on the top left. Sure enough, it was written in the same flowing script that the other books were written in. Sighing, Harry shut the book with a snap. However, just as he was about to close the book, he caught a glimpse of something written in the first page.

Recognising the script, Harry opened the book to that page again. Guessing that it was an incantation, Harry drew his wand and reading from the book, said, 'annuli apparere' hoping with all his might that it would present a solution to his problem.

Immediately a pedestal appeared bearing a cushion with a ring on top of it. Walking up to the ring, Harry picked it up to examine it. The emerald set into the ring had Slytherin's mark etched within. It reminded Harry of one of those glass cubes Dudley had bought for himself in an amusement park with his face etched inside that had lasted for a week before the fat twit destroyed it. Actually Harry had

done the actual destruction. It was one of those few times that he had managed to get away with it and blame Dudley for it. Harry thought it as a mercy killing. The poor glass must have suffered a lot having something so ugly within it!

Reciting the oath that he had said upon putting on the Potter and Black family rings, Harry slipped this ring onto his right ring finger, next to the Black family ring which he had taken to wearing on his right pointer finger with the Potter family ring now resting on his left ring finger.

Immediately upon placing the ring, Harry felt a small niggling in his mind. He had about half a second to think that maybe putting the ring on without having it examined might have been a bad idea when he was abruptly transported into a world of pain as his mind was suddenly and brutally assaulted by information. Sinking to his knees clutching his head, Harry closed his eyes tightly, trying to ride out the pain. Just when he thought he might pass out from the pain, the information flow stopped.

Shaking his head, Harry got to his feet, swaying a bit and silently resolving not to put on strange rings without knowing what they do.

He noticed a pile of documents behind the plinth when he gave it a glare as if blaming it for the pain the ring had caused him. Looking them over, he found that they detailed the location of two diamond mines and one gold mine. He might have to get these checked out, for he wasn't sure what state they would be in after centuries of disuse. For all he knew, they could be barren.

What was interesting however, were the documents detailing the castle plans and the layout of the wards. There were also instructions on how Harry could recharge and take control of said wards from the current headmaster should he so desire. It all but gave him full control of the castle. He would have to think about this. Right now he had no reason to do so, but it was an interesting proposition.

Harry smiled at this; finally he found some documents that belonged to Slytherin that he could read. Sure they were in Latin, and the handwriting wasn't great, but...

Wait a minute, since when did he know how to speak and read Latin?

Harry's thoughts ground to a halt at this. He was certain that he had no knowledge of the language beyond the few phrases and words he had used when casting spells. He looked with suspicion at the ring he had put on.

Going on a hunch, he went back to the bookshelf. Opening the first book which had contained the incantation to make the signet ring appear (he now knew what "Annuli Apparere" meant) he stared at the first page written in the foreign script;

Suddenly the letters in the script seemed to make sense to Harry where they had not done so before. Reading a few lines, he came to the conclusion that it was Salazar Slytherin's journal. Harry was excited. Here was basically the life of one of the four founders of Hogwarts written in his own words! Not only that, but Slytherin was one of the most talked about Parselmouths as well as the most mysterious. Slytherin certainly would have put in some spells written down in Parseltongue.

My name is Salazar and I am the eldest son of the Slytherin clan were the opening lines of the first page.

As I write this, I have completed a hundred and twenty years of my life. And what a life it has been. In the following pages, I have documented all that I have seen, learnt and done. In an effort to make sure that only my true heir can read this, I have translated all of my memoirs which were written in Anglo-Saxon, Gaelic and Latin into the language of the snakes of which the written form I had learnt in the far east.

I do not know, however, if these memoirs will ever be read. As I sit writing this, I think of my current family. I am the last of the true Slytherin line left. Almost all of my sons and family relations have killed each other off in a bid for power and the right to the title of head of Slytherin house and the access to the family fortune it will bring them. To think, that a man would be willing to kill his own brother just for material gain. Oh how far the noble line of Slytherin has fallen: Cousins killing cousins; uncles killing their nephews, and sons willing to end the lives of their own fathers with nary a thought.

In my disgust, I have taken each and every last sliver of gold, silver and bronze belonging to the family, and secreted it away in my chamber leaving the barest of amounts in the goblin vaults. I have also placed modified secrecy wards on all properties owned by me and placed their secrets here in the vault

The world thinks me dead, and I plan on keeping it that way. Godric may think that he has driven me away, but he forgets that the castle is mine. It was built on my land, by my own architects. He also forgets that I have woven the wards, that my blood fuels them. It is of no importance anyhow.

I have sealed away this chamber. Only a pure-blood descendant of mine with sufficient power and the Gift will be able to open this chamber. That should ensure that only those worthy of my title and power shall gain access to it.

I think this shall be a good way to test the worth of my youngest daughter's children. Morag Gaunt may be a cunning and intelligent man from a wealthy family, but I still have my reservations about him. I have watched his children grow up from the shadows. They do possess my gift. The problem is their father's theory on keeping the family magic strong. I am not comfortable with the idea of a person marrying a blood relation to keep the line pure. While His Majesty's family does it, I cannot help but feel that it may diminish the magical power of the offspring.

I refuse to have a magically weak individual be the next Lord Slytherin. Nor do I wish a person of dirty blood to be one either. To this end, I have created these wards. Only a person who is born of magical blood, bearing my magical gift and sufficient power shall enter.

My time is running out. The translation spell took its toll on me. This body is no longer as spry as it used to be. However I am not done yet. I still have to place the necessary spells on my ring to transfer the knowledge of how to read and write in the Language of the Snakes to the next heir. I fear it may be the last action of mine upon this earth.

I have instructed the house-elves to transport my remains to the secret burial chamber where the remains of Gryffindor, Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff shall also join me later on, transported secretly by the

house-elves of the castle. They don't know it yet, and I hope that Godric can forgive me later on. However, this is for the greater good. Our bodies, so strong in magic, shall be able to fuel the wards and magic of the castle, reducing the amount of time it will take for the castle to become self sustaining according to Rowena's calculations. I have also prepared a separate crypt for the headmasters and headmistresses of the school who prove to be the most powerful and the most dedicated towards the school. I am sure they shall not refuse the honour. Their families shall forever think that they have been buried in the family graveyard. Never knowing that the bodies will rest within the school they helped to build and guide.

I have also tasked the small staff of elves to bond with the castle and the witch or wizard that has taken on the mantle of being headmaster of the school for the duration of his or her tenure. The elves have sworn an oath to me that they and their descendants shall obey whoever bears my ring. This is something that I had not expected ... suffice to say, I am touched.

To my future heir, whoever you are. This page serves as my last will and testament. The fact that you have found my Chamber of Secrets and the Vault and can read this proves that you have what it takes to put on the Signet Ring of the House of Slytherin. Bearing the ring makes you Lord Slytherin, the Earl of Grantabrycge, no matter your age. It is my wish that you carry the Slytherin name with honour and pride and restore its reputation.

It is also this old man's hope that you continue and hopefully realise the goals that I had started. These will be clarified in the following pages of this book and the next eleven books detailing my life story.

Good luck, and may Merlin watch over you.

Harry stood there gobsmacked as he read what Slytherin had written. He was sorely tempted to turn the page and continue reading. However, a glance at his watch showed that he did not have the time to do so if he wanted to explore the other passageway, which, if his hunch was correct, was the same one mentioned in the book. So, it was with great regret that he shut the book and replaced it on the shelf. At least, he would have to tell the goblins about the change in his status. He would also have to debate on whether or not it is feasible to have the rather sizeable fortune transferred to Gringotts. He knew that the goblins would have an orgasm at the

sight of all that gold. The fortune here was certainly making him feel close to having one! Though it could be because he hadn't shagged in a while ... Harry shrugged at that. He would have to look into that later. Till then he would have to rely on his hand to take care of things.

Stepping towards the vault entrance, Harry wondered how he was going to open the door when it automatically slid open, answering his question. Stepping outside with the sheaf of documents in his hand, he watched as it closed behind him.

Turning around, he headed towards the second closed archway. As he approached it, the signet ring that he had just worn gave a pulse causing the archway to slide open in the same manner. Not breaking his stride, Harry entered the passageway.

He walked through the tunnel, his path lit by torches showing the smooth stone that made the sides of the tubular tunnel and in a short while he found himself at the end of the tunnel.

What he saw took his breath away.

The tunnel opened out into a large balcony carved into a ledge at the other side of the mountain that Hogwarts was built upon. A design that Harry could not decipher was engraved upon the floor. While the balcony was left open to the elements, the detail in the design made Harry suspect the presence of a ward designed to repel the elements. Unfortunately the furniture hadn't survived, as was evidenced by the cracked pieces of stone that once might have been a bench.

However it wasn't the balcony that had Harry's attention. It was the view the balcony afforded. From the balcony, bathed in the dying light of the sun, he could see a green valley with a bed of daffodils at the bottom near a small brook with a few trees scattered here and there. Placed near the brook was a small stone structure.

Inching to the edge, Harry gingerly looked down. The drop was pretty steep. The boy carefully stepped back as the distance to the valley floor coupled with the lack of a railing or any other safety feature gave him vertigo. Turning around, he looked up and saw the back of the castle rising up above him. He had to strain a bit to see

the towers, but he guessed that he was below the astronomy tower. He daredn't lean back any further for fear of plunging to his death.

Resolving to take his broom with him the next time he came here, Harry hurried back up the tunnel and from there, to the castle. He had Slughorn's party to attend.

More than a month had passed and it was now midway through October. Neville and the girls had improved a lot over that time and contrary to Harry's initial expectations had stayed with the programme. Though, Harry wondered how enthusiastic they would be after the winter holidays.

Due to the worsening weather conditions, the girls had bullied Harry into using the Room of Requirement for their exercises, only using the grounds occasionally on days like today, when the weather permitted it, meaning, according to Neville and the girls, when it wasn't pouring down so much that they would have been better off swimming in the lake with their clothes on.

While the Room was limited in size, using it afforded them the advantage of allowing them to switch to practising their spell-work almost immediately, thus cutting down the amount of time they spent in the morning.

Done for the morning, Harry headed towards the dorms to get ready for the first trip of the term to Hogsmeade. He and Daphne had agreed to meet at The Three Broomsticks for their first official outing. Slughorn's little party didn't count as it sounded too much like a school function, even though they knew that it was a private affair organised by Slughorn and not by the school. There was also the added disadvantage of not being with each other for most of the party seeing as the host saw fit to drag Harry from pillar to post (or in this case, politician to celebrity) to showcase the fact that he, Horace Slughorn, was teaching the Boy-Who-Lived (who was also now known as "the Chosen One").

As he stepped into the bathroom, Harry ruminated over the past month and a half.

The elves had finally managed to render the basilisk down into useful ingredients. Harry was now the proud owner of a large amount of shed snake skin, which while lighter and thinner than the

hide of the animal, was still tough enough. Harry planned on getting a pair of boots and perhaps a jacket or two made of the hide. It did give off a nice dark green colour when caught in the light while looking black otherwise. Though, a pair of gloves and a money bag sounded like a good idea too. He certainly had enough of hide and snakeskin to go around! Perhaps he could make small objects to give to his friends...

Along with the snake skin and hide, Harry also had two litres of basilisk venom. The ancient overgrown garden snake really could secret quite a large amount of the stuff. The venom was extremely corrosive as well as highly poisonous. It had worn through three pairs of the toughest dragon hide gloves before it was all extracted and stored in glass jars. For now, Harry had placed the venom in a secure vault in the basement of his Potter ancestral home. He might sell it in the future, in small doses of course, (he didn't want to flood the market and lower the price) but he was a bit leery of selling it. The venom could be deadly in the wrong hands.

Then there were the eyes, which may not be that useful seeing as they had been punctured with a phoenix's beak, the tongue, which may have some useful properties, and quite a lot of heartstrings. The snake did have a big heart ... the joke still cracked Harry up ever since he made it (though Randolph for some reason would have a pained look on his face when it was mentioned ... the elf had no humour whatsoever). And last but not the least were the teeth. Harry had one of the two large fully formed fangs in his trunk. He had no idea what he planned on doing with it yet. The other fang along with the unformed fangs found in the roof of the basilisk's mouth (there were four) were stashed together with the snake's normal teeth.

Once all the useful (or potentially useful) parts had been removed, what remained was the flesh of the snake, the rest of its internal organs and a partly digested Acromantula. As all of these were quite resistant to vanishing spells, it was decided to have the remains transported to the nearest volcano to be incinerated.

With traces of the snake now removed, the renovation of the chamber could begin. While the house-elves could restore the cave in, they did not have the skills necessary to restore the chamber proper to its former glory. That required a different skill set. It was one thing to patch up a piece of wall and make a rough but

serviceable tunnel. It was another thing entirely to repair a chamber that was created to be visually impressive.

After that was taken care of, Harry would then try to renew the charms. He hoped he could find what those charms were in the books that Slytherin had written so long ago so that he could fully renew them on his own.

However, that was proving to be a bit difficult. Salazar Slytherin, in his infinite wisdom, had interspersed all the spells he had learnt and invented with the story of his life. While the founder had fully detailed what he had learnt and the process involved in the invention of spells, that was routinely interrupted by details of what he had done for the day after he had finished his work.

Needless to say, it was rather vexing. Harry grumbled to himself as he thought of those books. Couldn't the man have written a separate book listing all the spells? No, he just had to write about his life and put in the spells in the middle so that anybody reading them also ends up finding out what he ate, drank and wore on the twelfth of November Nine Eighty Five. Salazar Slytherin, Harry concluded, was pretty full of himself. Harry was sure that Salazar Slytherin himself was the one who had erected that statue and set the password to open the aforementioned statue's mouth.

Harry sighed as the water from the shower hit his body. After running outside in the cold October morning, the warm water was extremely relaxing. It also let him see the positive side of those books. The books gave him a good idea about the full life of Salazar Slytherin, from the age of nine in Eight Eighty Five A.D., when he could first read and write, all the way to Nine Ninety Six A.D. where, at the extraordinarily long lived age of a hundred and twenty, he had written his last entry and had translated all his memoirs to Parseltongue.

So far from what Harry had read in the first book, Salazar Slytherin was the oldest son of a noble family that could trace its roots to the times of the Roman Empire. In fact, the Slytherins were the members of the original Wizards Council which had been formed by Merlin himself.

Though one thing that he hadn't been able to find out was just how he, a half-blood managed to pass the test and be let into the vault.

Sure he had been adopted by a pure-blood and had another pure-blood as his biological father. But it did not change the fact that his mother was Muggleborn. By all rights, he shouldn't have been able to access the vault.

Harry had so far read till Slytherin's life at the age of twelve. At that time, pure-blood children were educated in the ways of magic by their family members. The spells Salazar had learnt and written down (which were easily spotted as they were Latin words amidst a sea of Parseltongue) so far were basically the ancient and somewhat more primitive variant of the modern spells that Harry had learnt so far.

They weren't as polished and refined as the modern versions and they were wordier. For example, the variant of the levitation charm that Slytherin knew had four words as opposed to the two that Harry knew. Of course the upside to that was that there was little wand movement involved in casting, and the spell had a wider area of effect, enabling the caster to lift more than one object at a time with lesser concentration and wand movements, unlike the modern version, where one had to concentrate a bit more as well as include a wider swish. This had both an advantage and a disadvantage. It was useful if you wanted to lift and move several objects at once, but fairly useless when you only wanted to move just one object. To do that, another spell was required and it had even more words. Basically in those days, it was better to just lift a single object instead of going through the trouble of levitating it.

On the other hand, the ancient Latin precursor of the stunning spell (*exturbo*) seemed to be more powerful, if the crater the jet of vermillion light left behind as it exited out of Harry's wand as he cast the spell was of any indication. And if Harry was right, it was more resistant to the *rennervate* counter charm, as opposed to the counter listed in the book (*eruerere ex ignaro*).

The method of education was also different than that of Harry's time. Back then they learnt things the practical way. The noble families also kept up the traditions that were there in the erstwhile Roman Empire and this was seen in the small schools that they had established where they sent their children to learn along with other children of the same status. However, the "schools" in reality were travelling scholars who came to the home of one of the rich pure-bloods where all the children from the other families would

congregate. The less rich and privileged would generally be allied to a noble family and the nobility would see to the basic education of those children.

As soon as Salazar turned sixteen, he was to be shipped off to one of the oldest universities in the western world that was located in Greece, where he would study about the theories surrounding magic as well as rhetoric. Salazar however, wasn't too sure about it though.

Harry brought himself back to the present as he saw Daphne waiting for him by the front doors near the queue of students heading off to Hogsmeade. The Arithmancy and Ancient Runes classes had been cancelled for the day, meaning that Harry could go to Hogsmeade in the morning as opposed to later in the day.

'Daphne,' Harry said politely, slightly inclining his head 'You look lovely today.'

'Thank you Harry,' replied Daphne with equal politeness. 'You too, look well.'

Harry smiled and offered her a few of the daffodils from the valley. He had taken his broom and had gone down to the dale on a clear and surprisingly sunny Sunday. From up close, the small stone structure that he had observed at a distance proved to be a moderately large cottage. At least Harry guessed it used to be a cottage. There was nothing left of the place but loose slabs of stone which were barely recognisable and a wall weathered by a thousand summers and winters. The untouched beauty of the place was very overwhelming, and the silence peaceful.

'An interesting gift, Harry, I like the symbolism,' said Daphne, sounding faintly amused and a trifle surprised as they joined the queue behind the other students being checked for dark objects by Filch. Harry thought he heard Ron grumble loudly about Filch being stupid enough to want to check for objects being smuggled out of the school as opposed to into the school.

Harry was initially confused with Daphne's words. However a casual Legilimency probe across the surface of her thoughts, barely grazing her developing mental shields told him what she was talking about, saving him from having to admit his ignorance.

'Well, I felt it appropriate for our first date, considering that we barely know each other.' He said smoothly. 'Besides, it is the best I could find that was fresh. I don't think you'd appreciate flowers under preservation charms. I think those are too impersonal.' They barely noticed Ron's yelps as Filch took care to prod him a bit harder than normal.

'I didn't know there was a place where one could find winter daffodils here,' Daphne sounded slightly suspicious.

'Oh, I know of a place,' said Harry offhandedly.

'Really,' her tone rapidly changed to that of carefully controlled intrigue.

'Yes ... it's in a truly beautiful place. A place I can tell you with certainty that no one in the entire school, and that includes the headmaster I daresay, knows about,' said Harry mysteriously. Any further conversation was halted as they both were scanned by Filch for dark objects. Harry wondered why anybody would want to be smuggling objects out of the school, but felt that Filch or the teachers may have had a good reason for checking. Though, Harry did have a suspicion that Filch liked to prod students with his sensor as it gave him sadistic pleasure.

'I would very much like to see this place,' remarked Daphne casually as they set off through the grounds and towards the front gates out into Hogsmeade.

'It's a date then,' replied Harry with a smirk. 'Weather and time permitting of course,' he added indicating the overcast sky. The weather had gotten worse by now.

Daphne hummed in response, 'I think before the summer holidays, and just after the last of our exams would be a good idea.'

'June it is then,' said Harry winningly as they entered the village.

By the time they had reached the front gates, the wind had picked up speed, bringing sleet with it. The young couple had to struggle their way to Honeydukes. Once they entered the shop, Daphne cast a charm on her head which immediately rearranged her windblown hair back to the way she had styled it, thanking Harry as he cast a

warming charm over her first, doing the same for himself immediately afterwards.

Harry knew from Daphne's sister that both girls had quite a sweet tooth. Astoria had mentioned once that she used to sneak some chocolates from Daphne's private stash, and had done so regularly till her older sister had caught her in the act and hexed her to next week and back.

Harry thought of the difference between the sisters as he watched Daphne pick out a few bars of her favourite dark chocolates with orange flavouring. While both sisters were initially cold and aloof, with heavy doses of sarcasm in their speech, Daphne was the silent and introverted one, taking a long time to get to know a person while Astoria was a bit more extroverted and warmed up to a person quite well after they got to know her. Despite the rather frosty front the younger girl had put in the first few classes, Astoria had warmed up to Harry quite considerably by the third class. Not that she had stopped on the acerbic comments. Then again, Harry wasn't incapable of returning fire. Besides, irritating her was a lot of fun! She looked rather pretty when she gave him those annoyed looks or when she scrunched up her face in disapproval.

Daphne on the other hand had her own charm. While she was rarely one to speak, and she did not like to socialise much, when she did say something it was well thought out. She also had quite a twisted sense of humour which was rather dark at times.

In fact, Harry had only gone to one of Slughorn's parties with his future wife. Something that Slughorn had commented on when they met him in Honeydukes. The other subsequent parties were with some other girls he had decided to take a fancy to for the evening. Out of them the most memorable one was with Astoria. He might consider taking her again.

Their shopping done, and with three bags between the two of them, Harry and Daphne headed for the Three Broomsticks. Once outside, Harry swished his wand and thought *scutum contra ventum* in his head. Immediately a transparent shield sprung up in front of the couple lowering the stinging of the strong wind and sleet, reducing it to a mild, albeit cold and wet breeze.

'Impressive,' said Daphne as she saw the shield come into effect. Harry just shrugged and said that it was something he had read a while back. That spell was found in Slytherin's journal and protected the caster from the weather to a degree. Harry wasn't sure if there was a modern version to the spell, but he was rather happy with the current version that he knew, even if it was rather wordy.

While the shield did help with the visibility a bit, their view of the front was distorted as the wind kept blowing against the shield Harry had put up. So it was only when they were within a few feet of the men that Harry recognised Mundungus and the barman of the Hogs Head standing just outside the Three Broomsticks.

'Mundungus!' Harry called out as soon as he was within hearing distance. He noticed the tall thin barman had gone back to the direction of his pub.

The squat, bandy-legged man with long, straggly, ginger hair jumped and dropped an ancient suitcase, which burst open, releasing what looked like the entire contents of a junk shop window.

'Oh, 'ello, 'Arry,' said Mundungus Fletcher, with a most unconvincing stab at airiness. 'Well, don't let me keep ya.'

And he began scrabbling on the ground to retrieve the contents of his suitcase with every appearance of a man eager to be gone.

'Are you selling this stuff?' asked Harry watching Mundungus grab an assortment of grubby-looking objects from the ground.

'Oh, well, gotta scrape a living,' said Mundungus. 'Gimme that!'

He reached out to snatch a goblet from Daphne who had by that time picked up a goblet with a rather familiar crest on it that had come flying out of Mundungus's case and was lying on the street.

Mundungus never had a chance to get his hands on the goblet as he almost immediately found himself pinned against the wall of the pub, his eyes looking into the twin emerald flames that were Harry's eyes and his throat being held in the steely grip of Harry's hand.

'You took that from Sirius's house,' said Harry, in a dangerous voice, almost nose to nose with Mundungus. He ignored the unpleasant

smell of old tobacco and spirits that he got from the petty thief. 'That had the Black family crest on it.'

'I — no — what —?' spluttered Mundungus, who was slowly turning purple. He could barely speak as Harry's grip was too tight. In a dim corner of his mind, Mundungus vaguely wondered how such a skinny lad could be so strong.

'You dare, you dare steal from the house of Black? From MY house? From ME' snarled Harry, his features contorted in cold fury, looking every inch the aristocrat as his grip on Mundungus' neck tightened. His wand, held in his left hand and jammed into the thief's face began to slowly burn his jaw. While the mad glint in Harry's eyes wasn't as intense, it was pretty close to the one Bellatrix had in her eyes.

'I — no —'

'Give it to me!'

'Harry, you mustn't!' shrieked Hermione, appearing out of nowhere, as Mundungus started to turn blue.

The sudden intrusion broke Harry's concentration for just a millisecond. It was enough for Mundungus.

There was a bang, and Harry felt his hands fly off Mundungus's throat. Gasping and spluttering, Mundungus seized his fallen case, then — CRACK — he Disapparated.

Harry swore at the top of his voice, spinning on the spot to see where Mundungus had gone while cursing himself for losing concentration.

'It's no point shouting in the middle of the street Harry. He'll be in London by now,' said a woman with mousy brown hair and inconspicuous clothes who had practically appeared out of nowhere.

Harry slowly regained control of his emotions as he noticed that he had people watching him. His eyes still burning with a cold fury, he addressed the woman in a neutral tone while making sure not to mask his curiosity in order to offset the anger which would otherwise have coloured his voice, 'What are you doing here Tonks?' while her

disguise was good, Harry could still tell that it was his cousin of sorts. He still had to get his head around the whole relations thing.

'I've been stationed around Hogsmeade and Hogwarts as a part of protective duty,' said Tonks brightly.

'Is that so?' said Harry calculatingly. 'In that case, Auror Tonks, I would like to make a formal complaint against one Mundungus Fletcher for thievery from the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black.' Harry used the formal tones as had been described to him in the family books he had read over the summer. He did not know of all his duties or all the societal niceties a man of his stature was expected to know, so he relied on what he had observed of Lucius Malfoy, relying on his Occlumency to help with the image he was presenting.

Tonks immediately straightened up and in formal tones replied, 'Very well, Lord Black. I shall file a report immediately. An Auror will be by shortly to question you on the details of the case at your earliest convenience regarding the items stolen.'

'That is acceptable,' said Harry imperiously. Tonks nodded to the head of her maternal family once and Disapparated.

'Harry, why did she call you "Lord Black"?' Hermione decided to remind Harry of her presence at that point.

Daphne was the only person who saw the small twitch in Harry's right eye before he got himself in control as he rounded on the mudblood who had distracted her future husband with her self-righteous moaning. She was pretty impressed with the control he displayed. It seemed that the stories perpetuated around Slytherin house over the past few years were quite unfounded. This was no brash Gryffindor.

Unmindful of Daphne's thoughts, Harry gave Hermione a look a few degrees colder than the weather as he said in clipped tones, 'That is none of your business, Hermione.' he sort of blamed the girl for her intrusion. If she hadn't shouted so shrilly, he would have all his stuff back and it wouldn't be with that filthy thief. He was also furious with Dumbledore for not being able to control the members of his organisation.

Not giving the spluttering girl a chance to regain her senses, Harry gave a short nod to a very confused Ron who was standing next to Hermione in greeting, which Ron in his confusion, returned automatically, before sweeping around and with a complete change in expression, politely held out his arm towards Daphne Greengrass and upon her taking it, walked towards the Three Broomsticks, getting out of the cold.

By the time he had entered the pub, Harry's stormy expression was completely transformed into one of a person having a good day in the village. 'Not bad, Harry, you handled yourself quite well,' said Daphne into his ear softly, clearly impressed with the way Harry had handled himself. 'Father will be impressed.'

Harry just gave her a crooked smile and with a flourish, guided her through the warm and crowded pub. Escorting Daphne to a miraculously free table set in a corner, he went to the bar to get food and drinks for the both of them.

Sidling up to the bar, Harry expertly got around a couple of third year girls by flashing them a smile and a wink making them blush. Getting to the front, he gave Madame Rosmerta, the barkeep of the pub, a winning smile as she turned to take his order.

'Well, look what the kneazle dragged in,' exclaimed Rosmerta theatrically as she recognised Harry. 'Little Harry Potter. My you've grown up!' she looked at what she could see of him up and down. Unknown to Harry, Rosmerta's sharp eyes, honed from years of being able to spot trouble from rowdy customers even before they did anything, had caught sight of the ring on his left ring finger. The formal exchange Harry had earlier with Tonks had removed the concealment charms on the rings. Immediately recognising the Potter family crest, Rosmerta decided to show him a bit more attention than the other customers. He was a hormonal teenage male after all, and rich to boot. The fact that he was positively scrumptious only served to add to the fun. Sure the other boys were cute in that innocent schoolboy way, but they didn't look as lovely as the specimen in front of her.

Harry blushed slightly. Many a Hogwarts boy (including him) nursed a secret crush on the rather busty barmaid. However, she rarely initiated a conversation with them, electing to passively flirt with the lads, feeding on their egos so that she could get extra sales. Harry

was sure that he was one of few exceptions. The looks he was getting from the boys crowded around him proved that.

Quickly taking it in stride, Harry cleared his throat and ordered in his most mature voice, 'I'll have a plate of the house special and a medium rare steak for my date. And a Butterbeer for her as well...' Gulping heavily at the view that she had progressively presented him with as he spoke to her, he finished with a slightly high pitched 'that's it,' before heading towards Daphne sharpish. In his haste, he forgot to order a drink for himself. Something that Rosmerta had noticed.

On his way back, Harry greeted his friends and acquaintances. He also took care to greet those whom he didn't know personally, but had hailed him nonetheless, by name, lifting that bit of information directly from their unsuspecting minds.

Sitting down at the table, he just then noticed Hermione searching for someone or something with a glint of determination in her eyes. Having a good idea what this was about, Harry quickly ducked down and looked into Daphne's eyes, engaging her in conversation and acting natural. The table he had taken was well out of view and would require careful searching on Hermione's part to find.

Madame Rosmerta then came up to their table with their order levitating behind her. 'One plate of our special for the day, and a cut of our finest beef, medium rare,' she floated the plates over to their respective places.

Harry just realised that he hadn't ordered a drink when Rosmerta placed a Butterbeer in front of Daphne. Just as he was about to open his mouth, he noticed the empty glass and bottle of mead next to Rosmerta.

Madame Rosmerta turned to Harry and said, 'I had just opened a bottle of our finest house mead, and was wondering, milord, if you wanted to have a glass of it?' she indicated the mead floating next to her.

'Sure,'

Madame Rosmerta smiled and poured a glass for Harry. It was fortunate that the young lord had forgotten to order a drink for

himself. It allowed her to suggest something of a higher quality. Besides, what sixteen-year old would refuse alcohol when offered it? The best bit was she wasn't doing anything illegal since being the head of an Ancient and Noble house gave the boy the privilege of being able to drink something a bit stronger. Not that she planned on giving him anything stronger. She wasn't that bad. Unlike a certain barman who ran a certain shady pub down the road.

As the barmaid left swinging her hips provocatively, something she said finally registered with Harry. Looking down on his hands, he noticed that the concealment charms on all three of his rings had lifted making the stones glitter in the light of the well lit pub. Hastily concealing them again, he wondered aloud, 'Why did the rings show up all of a sudden?'

'That would be because you talked to that Auror, Tonks was it? In a formal tone ... you should have known that,' said Daphne. Harry cursed softly, 'Damn ... it's a good thing that only Tonks and Rosmerta saw that then. I don't know what would have happened if Hermione and Ron had seen them.' he breathed.

Daphne shook her head pityingly, 'and to think that I was getting pretty impressed with you and the way you handled yourself so far ... You still have a long way to go.' The humour in her eyes gave away the fact that she was teasing him.

'Wench,' replied Harry good naturedly. He took a sip of the mead; it was nothing like he had tasted before. It was rather smooth, with a hint of spice. Not like the bitter taste of vodka and rum that he had experience with. 'At least I'm getting there.' he said good-naturedly.

'True, but why do you want to hide your status?' asked Daphne curiously.

'I don't want certain people to know. Like Dumbledore for example, until I am seventeen at least.' replied Harry. 'I don't exactly trust him.' He said cautiously.

'Now I am even more impressed,' said Daphne. 'I twigged you as the Dumbledore supporter type. Father always said that you shouldn't trust a person who has been in politics for so long. Especially when that person keeps telling people he's not interested in running for

Minister. And Dumbledore has been at the game for quite a while now, almost a century I think.'

'Mr. Greengrass makes a fair point.' Harry took another sip of his mead, enjoying the taste again, before attacking his food.

They were halfway through their meal, Harry trading a few bites of his stovies for some of Daphne's steak when Hermione finally found them.

'Harry! There you are! I've been looking all over for you ... do you mind if we join you?' asked Hermione in one breath as she and Ron came up to the table. Harry sighed in resignation. He supposed that it was inevitable that Hermione would have found him, even if it was in a crowded pub. He braced himself for the potential scene this would make when he started the unenviable task of telling his best friend to bugger off as politely as possible when Daphne asserted her presence.

'If you don't mind, Granger, the two of us are on a date. Surely you can understand that and appreciate our need for privacy?' she cut in icily. 'Or is that a foreign concept to you?' she sneered. Despite being seated, she still managed to look down her nose at Hermione. Daphne was quite incensed at being so casually dismissed by that arrogant little strumpet. Who did she think she was?

As the two girls gave each other death glares, with Ron's ears starting to turn red at the insult to Hermione as he geared himself up to defend her honour, loudly, Harry frantically thought of a way to diffuse the situation before he was told to take a side, or before Ron decided to explode, creating a scene so big that it would silence the entire pub very shortly. Spotting Katie among the crowd of patrons, he got an idea. Getting her attention he called out clearly, 'Hey, Katie, how's tricks?'

The Gryffindor Chaser, who looked to be on her way to the loo gave Harry a smile and replied with an 'I'm great Harry, and you?' as she approached the table, allowing the girl behind her to overtake her.

Harry stood up and spoke to her for a minute before Katie excused herself. Sitting down, Harry smirked at the success of the plan. His greeting had served to remind Hermione that she was in a public place, making her leave shortly, probably tugging Ron along the way,

preventing a potential scene and getting them all thrown out of the pub.

Daphne then spent the next five minutes calling Hermione Granger many creative names and making her opinion on Harry's best friends' manners known very clearly. While Daphne did not rant, and she certainly spoke softly, the vitriol in her words wasn't in the least bit diluted. Harry, not having seen this side of her was completely thrown off balance for a moment. Eventually after some cajoling by Harry and a dessert of chocolate mousse supplied by a rather attentive Madame Rosmerta, she calmed down.

Paying the bill and leaving a hefty tip as gratitude, Harry left with Daphne for Hogwarts. The date had gone so-so in Harry's opinion as he watched Daphne head off towards the Slytherin dorms. He clutched the goblet with the Black family crest that she had picked up which Mundungus had not been able to snatch and handed to him. It certainly wasn't a stellar romantic date of all dates. But on the bright side, it wasn't dismal either. Happily twirling the goblet in his hands, Harry left for the dorms, idly wondering why he hadn't found a single teacher on his way there.

A thank you to Miss Lalla for her invaluable help with the chapter!

Walking up to the gargoyle that guarded Dumbledore's office, Harry passed through the opening behind the statue without breaking his stride as it jumped aside upon hearing the password he had given. Upon knocking on the door to Dumbledore's office, he entered and sat down across the aging headmaster.

Dumbledore looked more tired than usual today. His hand was as black as ever. But he still smiled as he gestured for Harry to sit down in front of him. Harry kept his face blank as he eyed the Pensieve that was rightfully his sitting on the headmaster's desk.

'You've had a busy time while I was away,' Dumbledore remarked. 'I believe that you witnessed the accident that happened in Hogsmeade?'

'Not really, sir,' Harry corrected. 'Ron and Hermione were the ones who saw everything. I completely missed what happened since I was in the Three Broomsticks.' He paused for a moment before resuming, 'What exactly happened, sir? There are rumours that Sally-Anne has perished in the hospital...'

'Miss Perks is definitely alive at the moment,' said Dumbledore reassuringly. 'Although, it is not known if she will make it out alive. The healers at St. Mungo's are doing the best they can to ensure her survival. However, she has been in significant contact with the curse, so their hopes are dim.' He finished grimly.

'I don't know why anybody would want to kill her,' Harry said. He did not remember much about the girl, except that she was in his year till her fourth year when she had been held back because she hadn't done that well in her exams. Still, he felt the need to say something of that fashion.

Dumbledore debated with himself for a moment whether or not to give Harry additional information 'I do not believe that the cursed necklace Miss Perks was given was meant for her,' he finally said, looking at Harry with his clear blue eyes.

'So it was a necklace then?' Harry sat forward at this.

'Yes,' said Dumbledore. 'A magnificent piece with some truly stunning opals set into it. I would have shown it to you, but the Dee Em El Eay is currently studying it hoping to counter the curse. I am

told by the main witnesses that it was last seen in a shop in Knockturn Alley going by the name of Borgin and Burkes. I am sure that you are familiar with this establishment.'

'Really?' Harry raised an eyebrow at this. 'And what else did Ron and Hermione tell you?'

'Well, they had quite an interesting little theory that Draco Malfoy was the perpetrator of the attack,' remarked Dumbledore casually.

Harry rolled his eyes at that. He couldn't believe that those two had shared that theory with Dumbledore.

'What do you make of that sir?' Harry asked respectfully, not letting his thoughts show.

'To paraphrase what Minerva told them when Mr. Weasley and Ms. Granger shared that theory with her, Draco Malfoy was at that moment in a detention supervised by her. So he has a credible witness to his whereabouts.'

Harry smirked at that. There was no way Malfoy was behind this. 'I had a feeling that Malfoy wouldn't have done that,' he said. He did not voice aloud how typical of Malfoy that plan was in its sloppiness seeing as he had been victim to similar plans in the past that in hindsight were rather blatantly sloppy and obvious.

'Indeed,' agreed Dumbledore. Harry noticed the headmaster's voice was faintly troubled, but did not remark on it.

After a few minutes of silence Dumbledore spoke again, 'well let's get cracking shall we? I think we should carry on with our lesson without haste, lest we end much too late. Last time we had learnt that Merope Gaunt had ensnared the village squire's son who only a few months later had returned to his senses where he abandoned a pregnant Merope Gaunt now Riddle.' He paused to collect his thoughts.

'I have learnt later on that Merope was left alone in London, abandoned by Tom Riddle and shortly expecting a baby that would one day become Lord Voldemort. How I know this is because of the evidence of one Caractacus Burke, the co-owner of Borgin and Burkes, the store we had discussed earlier.' With that he extracted

another phial and poured the memory inside the Pensieve. He then started swilling the contents, looking very much like a gold prospector sifting for gold.

Out from the silvery mass came the figure of a little old man, his feet disappearing inside the Pensieve, his hair covering his eyes.

Harry watched as the man boasted of managing to buy a priceless artefact for all of ten Galleons. He shook his head. To think that a descendant of the famed Salazar Slytherin, the one personification of what it meant to be cunning and ambitious was swindled out in such a fashion by the proprietor of a seedy store. It looked like Salazar was right in having taken precautions against Morag Gaunt's offspring. Who knows what would have happened to the Slytherin family fortune had they enjoyed full access to it.

'Caractacus Burke wasn't known for his generosity,' remarked Dumbledore lightly. 'So we now know that Merope Riddle was in a desperate situation. So great was her desperation that she was happy to sell a priceless artefact for a pittance. I am guessing that her husband abandoning her caused her to give up on using her magic as she no longer wanted to be a witch. So great was her depression at being abandoned that she did not raise her wand to even save herself when she was at death's door.'

'She couldn't be bothered to save herself and live on for her own son?' Harry said with a light sneer in his voice.

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows.

'Could you possibly be feeling sorry for Voldemort?'

'Not entirely, no,' said Harry. He did not mention that he did feel sorry for the boy that was Tom Riddle. 'But Merope had a choice to stay alive for her son, who clearly needed her. Not like my mother.'

'Your mother also had a choice, Harry,' said Dumbledore gently. Harry snorted at that. 'Oh yes, either she dies now, or a few minutes later after Voldemort finishes me off. Yeah, that's a great choice,' he said sardonically.

'I do believe that Voldemort had given your mother a choice to step aside and live or die defending you,' said Dumbledore mildly.

Harry snorted at that. 'Yes, because Voldemort is very well known for keeping his word,' he said sarcastically. Then, he narrowed his eyes in suspicion. 'How did you know about what Voldemort said to my mother anyway? I don't recall telling you anything about it.' Realising whom he was talking to, he hastily added, 'sir.'

'I heard it from Remus, in your third year,' said Dumbledore calmly. Internally he was cursing himself for the slip. He was glad that Remus had actually said that, as it made it easier to use the misdirection. Otherwise, it was close to revealing Severus's secret. Something he didn't want to happen. He truly wished that Severus would just come out, let go of the bitterness and be frank with Harry. He knew that Harry would forgive the man for his past mistakes.

Harry's eyes flashed green at this. He wasn't sure that he liked people talking about him and his personal matters so openly. He wondered if there was any point trusting adults, when all they were going to do was gossip about his past and personal matters in such a blasé fashion with no regard to his feelings.

'Anyway, where was I? Yes, Merope Riddle chose death over a son that needed her. However, do not judge her too harshly, Harry. She had been greatly weakened by long suffering and she never had your mother's courage. Now if you will stand...'

Harry stood silently, listening with half an ear to Dumbledore talking about the memory that they were going to be entering. He still thought of Merope Gaunt as a weak individual. It was the wretched woman's own fault that she had found herself in this situation. Yes, she had made the mistake of trusting that the Muggle she had ensnared would be receptive to her once removed from under any magical influence she had put upon him, that was acceptable. What was not acceptable, however, was her reaction to her husband leaving her. She should have shown more gumption, in Harry's opinion; she could have used her brains to get money and a good job. At the very least she could have insisted on getting a better price for the locket. Surely, she wasn't so stupid that she couldn't have realised the true worth of the locket that was in her position? And lastly she could have tried to live on and take care of her child. If not for him then for the love she allegedly felt for his father. It was because of her stupidity and bad decisions that Harry was currently

in this position, faced with the task of ending the life of Merope Riddle, nee Gaunt's mistakes.

She truly was weak he thought with a great degree of contempt and loathing as he dived into the memory that Dumbledore had extracted.

A few minutes later, he exited the memory full of thoughts. The first of them was that Dumbledore also wasn't above magically manipulating Muggles for his benefit if he saw the need. He had to admire the skill and finesse with which Dumbledore had managed to Charm that Muggle, conjure up the glasses and summon the bottle of gin without so much as drawing a wand. He bet that the gin had a few potions or charms within it too. Surely no one would open up so much after only having a glass or two.

His thoughts were shortly diverted towards the young boy once known as Tom Riddle when Dumbledore started pointing out characteristics he had noticed all those years ago when he had met the boy.

'He also seems to be a bit of a kleptomaniac,' Harry chipped in.

His comment definitely caused Dumbledore's eyes to twinkle in amusement. The headmaster's beard twitched as he smiled, 'I wouldn't call him a kleptomaniac exactly.' He said with amusement, 'but you have a point, Harry.'

'Well he is,' said Harry. 'He likes to collect shiny things and squirrel it away in little hidey-holes, and it takes a lot of effort to get him to part with said trophies. That's kleptomania, that is.'

'Impressive, Harry, you have noticed an important characteristic of Voldemort. He still likes to collect such trophies. Remember this, for it will come in handy.'

Recognising the dismissal, Harry made to get up. However, he seemed to have misread the situation as Dumbledore spoke again.

'Before you go, Harry, there is one other thing I wish to speak to you about,' said Dumbledore.

Half out of his chair, Harry sank back down with typical teenage gracelessness. 'What is that, sir?'

'I heard from Miss Tonks that you had filed a complaint against Mundungus Fletcher?' Dumbledore began delicately.

'Of course,' said Harry calmly. 'I caught him stealing from me! I actually caught him in the act of selling the Black Family heirlooms to the barkeep of the Hog's Head!'

'That mangy old half-blood has been stealing Black family heirlooms?' said the portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black, clearly incensed.

'Oh, that is not all,' said Harry to the portrait of his ancestor. 'When I accosted him, he actually had the nerve to snatch back the goods and make off with them!'

His proclamation had all the portraits listening shouting with outrage. 'The nerve!' said the portrait of a corpulent red nosed Dexter Fortescue while another portrait of a gimlet eyed witch said with disappointment and disgust, 'what are times coming to, nowadays? Why back in my day...'

'I hope you have managed to track him down Albus?' said Phineas cutting through the noise being made by the other portraits. Immediately the other portraits quietened as they all trained their painted eyes upon Dumbledore, looking at him expectantly.

'Yes about that,' said Dumbledore. 'I am afraid that with the current situation, I have had to tell Nymphadora to drop the case-'

He was cut off when Harry got to his feet and roared in an incandescent rage, 'what?' which was shortly drowned out by the outrage coming from the other portraits.

Once the portraits had calmed down, Harry quietly, but no less furiously, spoke up, 'what gives you the right to do that?'

'Harry you have to understand, we are at war with Voldemort. The Aurors are spread thin as it is. They do not have the time and resources to find and apprehend a common criminal. Besides, the Order needs him and his contacts. He is too valuable to be sent to prison.' Dumbledore said cajolingly, trying to get Harry to see it from

his point of view. 'It is for the greater good. What are a few possessions compared to that?'

That was absolutely the wrong thing to say. Harry had grown up without anything of his own. Almost everything he owned before he turned eleven was always somebody else's, given to him grudgingly and with contempt. Because of this, he had come to cherish his possessions to an almost possessive level. While he did not mind sharing, he hated it when people treated his things with casual indifference, as if they did not matter.

'I see,' he said waspishly. 'Of course, what are a few possessions when compared to your "greater good"? It really is easy to sacrifice someone else's things isn't it? Especially mine,' His voice shook with restrained emotion. 'I noticed that you did not say anything about trying to even make an attempt at getting my things back from that conniving, filthy thief!'

'Harry-'

'What if I decide to go directly to the head of the De Em El Eay?' Harry cut across before Dumbledore could say a thing.

The headmaster's face closed up, the amount of travelling he had done in the last few days had taken quite a toll on him. This, coupled with the curse affecting him, was leaving him short-tempered and a little irritable. 'Well,' he said with a seeming casualness, 'seeing that as I am the Supreme Mugwump of the Wizengamot, and you are a minor, you will find that the case will be dropped. Add to the fact that I am your magical guardian, well, the case won't even see the light of day.'

Harry reared back as if he had been slapped. Dumbledore's tone was light, but he had caught the underlying steel in the older man's voice.

'Well in that case, I guess this means that the Order of the Phoenix is no longer welcome in my house. I will not have petty thieves in there, so I guess you will have to find another place to hold your little meetings.' Harry growled out.

'I wish you did not do that Harry,' said Dumbledore sadly. 'Unfortunately as your magical guardian, I can still use your house.'

While I cannot overrule your decision if you were of age, as you are still underage, you cannot make such a decision, as such a decision would rest with me, your magical guardian.'

'Ah, but headmaster,' Harry smiled coldly. 'There is one small issue.' He took a minute to watch the victorious look on Dumbledore's eyes to dim before continuing. 'You see, I am emancipated. The previous Minister so graciously saw to that when he tried to try me as an adult so that he could bring the full force of the Wizengamot to bear. So I am very much of age. And since that decision hasn't been contested for a year now, in the eyes of the Ministry it means that you cannot overrule the decision. Supreme Mugwump or not,' Harry knocked on the desk in front of him lightly after saying the last word.

The boy took a moment to savour the look of surprise and dawning comprehension on Dumbledore's face before continuing. 'Oh and let's not forget that the goblins have declared you an unfit guardian. I wonder what the wizarding world would do when that fact becomes public...' he put on a fake look of wide-eyed thoughtfulness on his face.

Albus cursed to himself inwardly on hearing this bit of information. He knew that there was something that had been overlooked at that trial. However, with the fiasco at the Ministry and the chaos Voldemort had caused once his presence was publicly acknowledged, he had forgotten about that fact. And Harry had somehow found out about it. It looked like Miss Granger was right about one thing.

'I see that reports about you were true,' he said, injecting as much disappointment as he could into his voice. 'Initially I did not believe them because of my faith in you, but I see that I had misplaced my trust in you. I am very disappointed with the way you risked your life by leaving the safety of your relatives' house Harry.'

However, Harry wasn't fazed in the slightest. Instead of the expected look of shame on the boy's face, Dumbledore was very surprised indeed when Harry remained unaffected.

'Well, there is nothing I can do about that headmaster,' said Harry politely. 'After all, it was during the summer holidays, so school wasn't in session. Also you were no longer my guardian by that point, and I was emancipated ever since August of last year. So I am

afraid that you cannot do anything about my activities during that period.'

Still smiling pleasantly, Harry continued, 'Anyway, now that we have that cleared up, please do tell the members of your little group to vacate the premises. I am sure that five days won't be an unreasonable time for that to be taken care of.' He stood up to leave.

'Oh, it won't be much of a problem Harry,' Dumbledore replied with equal pleasantry. 'However, there is the small problem of me being your secret keeper. I do not think that you would want to throw the secret keeper of your own house out now, would you? Who knows what could happen.' Albus wasn't happy with taking this route, but he knew he had to do it to rein Harry in. The boy was getting bit of a big head now, so it was necessary. But it still hurt to do so, as he looked at that young face close up, as the boy sat back down on the chair with a look of betrayal in his eyes, before he closed them and hung his head in apparent defeat.

'Harry, I assure you that I will have a word with Mundungus,' Albus said cajolingly.

Before the headmaster could continue however, Harry opened his eyes and said roughly, 'I don't want to hear it.' His voice trembled slightly with the rage and betrayal he felt. To think that Dumbledore had actually blackmailed him like this!

'I should have known that you would take his side. After all, you aren't quite averse to stealing from children now are you? You did steal my childhood from me.' While he tried to keep his tone light, his voice still trembled a bit.

'I don't know-'

Harry laughed slightly hysterically, cutting Dumbledore off, 'Oh please! You know! You know what I am talking about! It's because of you' he pointed an accusing finger across the room at the headmaster. 'That I had a crappy childhood. You are the reason that I had no decent clothes for most of my life until I bought them using my own money! It's because of you that I had to survive on meagre amounts of food ... that I had to live in a fucking cupboard for ten years of my life. AND IT IS ALSO BECAUSE OF YOU THAT I WAS

TREATED LIKE A SLAVE BY THOSE FILTHY MUGGLES!' as he shouted the last bit out, his magic swirled, destroying the window.

Breathing hard, he continued at a rapid pace, 'Did you know that they used to throw me in that bloody cupboard without food for a week at the least if I did some accidental magic? Did you? Oh who am I kidding? Of course you did!'

'Harry I swear that if I had any idea-'

'DON'T. LIE. TO ME!' shouted Harry, his face red with fury and his eyes beginning to water slightly as he felt all the resentment he had towards Dumbledore pour out of him. His body sent out another pulse of magic. The delicate instruments in Dumbledore's office, that had been recently repaired, shattered again, along with the vials of memory that had been laid out for the lesson. The contents within pooled out onto the desk before disappearing into the ether. Portraits shouted at the noise this caused and Fawkes, Dumbledore's phoenix elected to stay out of the fight as he disappeared with a squawk and a flash of flames. It wasn't Fawkes's job to sort through every single fight after all. It was close to his burning day and like all other phoenixes, he was feeling a bit moody.

'You think that I am so stupid as to believe that you didn't know? Huh? Well, I know all about Figg! I know she's been watching me all this time! And she all but admitted that she knew about my home life! Hell, you admitted that fact last year! Wasn't it you who said that you knew what you were consigning me to when you placed me like a fucking bottle of milk on the doorstep of my relatives' home in the dead of the night in November? So don't give me your crap!'

'I also have to wonder why you never told me of my inheritance and why you kept that information, which was my right, from me! I also have to wonder why I had to find that out for myself.' Harry paused to take a breath before speaking what he thought. 'It's because you wanted it all for yourself wasn't it? I bet you were hoping that I would just kick it, that either the cold winter or those Muggles would kill me or that Voldemort would do the job instead. Then you could just swoop in and take it all!'

'Enough!' said Dumbledore standing up, effectively silencing Harry. 'I am not what you make me out to be Harry. Do not for one moment assume that I want you dead to profit from you. I am truly sorry for

what you have gone through all these years, and I admit that I made a mistake. However, it is important that you do not become embittered by that.'

"Sorry"?' laughed Harry, 'You're "sorry"? Oh yes, that makes everything so much better.' He said derisively. 'Why that positively erases all the things you caused to happen. In fact, using your logic, I could go out right now, beat the first person I find within an inch of their life, kill their pet in front of them, and after that, just get away with it all just by saying "sorry".' He sneered at the headmaster, "'Sorry" does not make a dead man come back to life, and it certainly does not erase the crap you put me through. You had a choice to make it right, and you didn't. And I don't care what you say ... you knew what I had gone through!'

'And don't think I don't know about the cloak that you took from my vault and gave to me, while claiming that it was my father who had given it to you!' Harry stood there breathing heavily as the headmaster's face paled somewhat.

'I think we are done here, professor,' he continued in a calmer tone. 'Now I know that you are nothing but a manipulative, conniving, backstabbing old man who likes to steal from orphans and looks out for his own interests. I cannot believe that a person like you ever managed to become the headmaster of a school.' He swiped at his eyes and inhaled deeply to clear his nose. 'Unfortunately, while I would like to do nothing but stay away from you, with the current climate, it isn't that possible. I will be here for the next lesson. But you are deluded if you think that I will ever forgive you.'

With that hate filled statement, Harry turned around and stomped his way to the door. However, when he roughly grabbed the knob, he found it locked.

'Let. Me. OUT!' His face, which was already splotchy from the shouting that he was doing, steadily started returned to a deep crimson, as he turned around to face the headmaster and shouted out those words. His rage, that had been tempered somewhat, came back in full force.

'Not until we have cleared the air between us,' said Dumbledore firmly. He knew that he had to fix this, and fast.

Harry just growled in response, as he clenched his hands into trembling fists, all the remaining control he had slowly slipping away.

'Fine, you want to play this game? Then FINE!' He turned around and put his hand on the doorknob. 'Open in the name of Lord Slytherin' he hissed in Parseltongue, going on a hunch.

He smiled in triumph as the ring in his right hand flared before the door to Dumbledore's office unlocked with a smart click.

Smiling savagely at the shocked look Dumbledore's face, Harry yanked open the door.

'Harry if you walk out of that door, I will put you in detention,' Dumbledore said warningly, playing his last card in desperation.

'If you do that or anything else, then I will take it up with the board of Governors,' replied Harry vindictively. 'I bet that they and a certain reporter by the name of Rita Skeeter will be interested in hearing that the great Albus Dumbledore wishes to keep a student with him locked in his office ... think on how that will look ... old decapentagenarian in a position of power, attempting to lock a young sixteen year old student in his office with threats and attempting to abuse his authority ... I am sure that will go down well with the rest of the world. I wonder what Voldemort would do?' Not waiting for a response, he walked out, slamming the door behind him with so much force that the remaining instruments that had survived the magical assault trembled before they tipped over from their tables to break on the floor.

Dumbledore sighed. 'That went well,' he muttered to himself as he surveyed his recently destroyed office. He smiled when he noticed that one of his inventions had survived the magical assault and the door slam. That smile soon disappeared when the delicate instrument slowly, but with increasing speed, fell apart, taking the table with it.

'Disgraceful,' said the portrait of the gimlet eyed witch as she eyed Albus. 'While I admit that the boy had been far out of line in talking to you, and would, if the situation were any different, richly deserve a good birching for his impertinence, I cannot help but sympathise with him. You have done him a grave injustice, Dumbledore.'

'I agree,' said the portrait of the corpulent wizard. 'If half of what the boy had said and accused you of was true, then he would be well within his rights to file a complaint against you. That he has not done so, despite knowing of what you have done to him for so long only shows his Gryffindor control.'

'Or it shows his Slytherin cunning,' said the portrait of Dilys Derwent. This sparked off a quiet but heated debate with three other portraits near her as to which characteristics Harry Potter showed best, and what house he was in, completely forgetting that the boy was in Gryffindor.

'I cannot believe that you would let a petty criminal get away with this,' said Albus's former employer and predecessor, Armando Dippet. His proclamation was met in agreement by the other portraits, the most vocal of whom were Dexter Fortescue and the gimlet-eyed witch.

Dumbledore sighed. 'I think you may have a point there,' he addressed the portraits at large. 'However, Mundungus Fletcher is the kind of criminal who is capable of disappearing rather well. It would be folly to hunt for him when we have matters of a more dire nature to deal with. Even if a complaint were to be made, the case would be given little importance.'

'You could have just explained that to the boy, Albus,' said another portrait softly. 'Surely he would have understood? After all, you did speak highly of him. You would have saved yourself unnecessary pain and drama if you had frankly told him why you did what you did.'

'I may have forgotten myself,' said Dumbledore slowly. Just now he realised how badly he had acted in the heat of the moment. Something he hadn't done in a long time. 'Alas, I fear that in my tiredness I acted foolishly.' He sat in silent contemplation for a moment, his head in his hands, 'It is going to take a lot of work to mend this fence.' He sighed tiredly. 'Also, I will have to address the issue of the life to which I had consigned young Harry all those years ago. Clearly the lad still has issues ... I have much to atone for.' And he has raised a lot of questions as well. How, for one, did he manage to unlock the door without my permission? The Parseltongue command overriding his wishes had really jarred Albus. He had felt the faint and minute shift in the wards before they had

settled back into his control. He hoped that Voldemort hadn't found out this titbit of information. Otherwise he would be marching into the gates of Hogwarts the next day. And he would be completely unopposed.

The ensuing silence was broken by a shouted, 'Hufflepuff!' from one of the portraits engaged in the House Debate. The occupant looked around shiftily and noticing the attention he was getting, cleared his throat and giving a fake yawn, dropped his head on the desk in front of him.

In all the confusion caused in the wake of Harry's departure, one portrait had not said anything. The occupant within it had watched with shrewd eyes as the boy raged at the headmaster and left the office in such a spectacular fashion. He had noticed a slight pull towards the boy when the child had entered the office for the first time. From experience he knew that it was the same pull a portrait feels towards the current head of the family. It was only because of this initial pull that he noticed the increase in that feeling when the boy had issued that command and made that declaration.

However he had no time to ponder that at the moment, since he had a descendant as well as an heir of one of the Founders to help out. Never mind that he still had no idea how said descendant came about.

Slipping out of his portrait, he passed through several others before he found his target approaching his current location.

Harry swept through the corridors, his mouth twisted in a rictus of anger and rage. He badly felt like causing violence and a small part of him was hoping for an opportunity to carry out that urge on somebody. Hopefully, Malfoy or Snape would turn around a corner soon. Well maybe not Snape. The man did have quite a repertoire of spells. His classes showed at least that much. Harry did not want his arse handed to him, thank you very much, especially not by the one person whom he loathed with every fibre of his being.

Thinking of Snape got him thinking about Dumbledore and how the old man had treated him. That inevitably got Harry's blood racing with even more renewed rage.

Dumbledore, thought Harry with a new sense of loathing, breathing heavily as he stopped walking. It was because of that man that Harry had suffered so. Voldemort might be the reason for Harry's parents dying, and he may be a psycho after Harry's blood, and Harry may hate Voldemort with as much vehemence as Voldemort hated him, but it was Dumbledore that Harry currently hated the most.

While Harry hated Voldemort, he knew where he stood with that wizard. Each wanted the other dead; there was no doubt about that. Dumbledore, on the other hand, was far more insidious. He pretended to have Harry's best interests at heart but at the same time had planned and plotted to make sure that Harry was as miserable as ever. He, unlike Voldemort, seemed to want Harry alive for his plans. Harry imagined Dumbledore sitting in his office, popping a sherbet lemon in his mouth and laughing his head off as he planned on new ways to make Harry's life a living hell. He even imagined the man currently finding new ways to make Harry's life hell for what had transpired in the office.

Harry had no idea why Dumbledore wanted that, and right then decided that he did not care about the why; he didn't care if the headmaster was doing this on purpose, nor if he really had no clue about how Harry's life had been. All he knew was his newfound hatred for that old man. And this time, he found himself reacting to this in a different way.

Instead of raging at the world, and fighting down the urge to storm back into the headmaster's office hexing the man, Harry actually felt in control of himself.

No longer did he feel the white hot rage of justified righteous anger. Instead he felt cool and in control of his emotions as that anger bled away. He realised that he needed time to make plots of his own and level the playing field before he decided to take down the venerable headmaster.

He no longer wished to just finish Voldemort and be done with it. No, he now had two targets if he wanted to get on with his life.

His breathing slowed and his expression soon settled down. He did not even have to put in any effort to lock his emotions away, as he now felt more at peace with himself.

A discreet cough bought him out of his musings.

Looking up he saw Phineas Nigellus Black crowding three very disgruntled witches who looked to be in the middle of making a potion.

'Good to see that you have regained control of yourself, Lord Slytherin. Or is it Black? I'm not so sure...' He lifted an enquiring eyebrow at Harry.

Harry kept a carefully blank expression on his face as he looked at the painting of his great-great-great grandfather. 'I have no idea what you are talking about.'

Phineas just ignored him as he thought aloud, 'Or is it Lord Potter? Then again, I do recall the Potters gaining the titles and privileges that came with uniting with the House of Gryffindor...' he fixed Harry with a shrewd look.

'Any one of the three will be fine professor,' said Harry blandly, betraying a little of his irritation, 'And it will be four ten years from now. Is there anything I can help you with, professor?'

Phineas was impressed with the boy's command of his emotions. Even for a budding Occlumens, such control was hard to obtain. 'No, it is I who can be of help to you.' Upon seeing Harry's surprised look he continued, 'You being the first Lord Slytherin in centuries has already gained some loyalty from me as I was once a Slytherin myself. But on top of that, as the current head of the Black family and my descendant, and I noticed the resemblance to my late descendant by the way - it was perhaps wise of him to magically adopt you into the family, I feel it my duty to help you out in your time of need.' He finished with a dignified air.

'In what manner exactly?' asked Harry, amused.

'In that little pest problem of yours, of course,' seeing that he had Harry's undivided attention, he smirked and continued. 'Back in my day, the old families knew about the true value of house-elves. They were especially useful in tracking down people for us...' Here he trailed off suggestively.

Harry smirked coldly, as his eyes flashed an intense green. 'Why thank you for your help professor Black.'

'Don't mention it, lad. It is my obligation after all to see to the Black family's reputation. And scoundrels such as that thief do not help that reputation. Now I shall bid you adieu.'

'One last thing,' said Harry before Phineas could leave. 'How did you know that I am Lord Slytherin?'

'Are you daft boy?' said Phineas irritably, 'I heard you announce it! The whole room heard you announce it!'

'But I had said that in Parseltongue. I could have said anything really...' Harry defended himself. He narrowed his eyes in suspicion. 'Since when do you understand Parseltongue?'

'That was Parseltongue?' Phineas sounded surprised. 'Hmmm ... old Salazar Slytherin must have placed an enchantment on the portraits then ... this bears thinking about...'

'Ensure that the portraits do not tell anyone of my status,' Harry told Phineas' retreating back. The former headmaster only gave a wave in response as he left the portrait, leaving three gaping old witches in his wake along with the occupants of the other portraits.

'Lord Slytherin.' They curtsied as one, followed by the other portraits bowing or curtsying and before Harry knew it, the suits of armour were doing the same.

Harry sighed softly and said commandingly, 'This does not reach the ears of anybody living and that is an order.' He flashed his ring, getting nods of assent and wide eyed looks from the portraits as they too felt the pull towards him.

'Good, now if you don't mind I have some plotting to do.' With that Harry turned around and walked away. Entering an empty classroom, he closed the door and cast a locking charm on it. Making sure that nobody was there, he called for Kreacher.

With a pop the house-elf appeared. His hands were bandaged from the punishment Kreacher had given himself for not telling his master that Mundungus had stolen possessions from the House of Black

when Harry had called him the previous day and had angrily asked the elf why he had not been informed about the theft.

'Kreacher, I have a job for you. I want you to find Mundungus and capture him.'

Immediately the forlorn looking elf perked up. 'Master is wanting Kreacher to bring vile thief?'

'Yes, track him down and ambush him when you have the chance. Use any means necessary. Just don't harm him permanently. We do want to know where he has kept the stuff he has stolen from us after all...'

'Yes master,' the house-elf started bouncing excitedly. 'Kreacher will do.'

'Good,' said Harry. 'Put him in the dungeons in Black Castle, and then tell me when you have him. Ensure that I am alone at first, no one else should know about this. Get Dobby or one of the other elves to help you.'

'At once master.' at this Kreacher disappeared with a crack

Harry headed off to the Gryffindor tower, now in a much better mood.

A few days later, Harry was stretching and rubbing his eyes after he put down the second of Slytherin's journals as he thought about what he had learnt of the founder's life so far.

When he was twelve, tragedy had struck Salazar's family.

They are dead! I cannot believe that they have been killed! Mother ... Father ... my little brother and sister ... all brutally murdered!

They had come in the dead of night; sneaking up into the house like the rotten scum they are ... they were let in by our own servants...

It was only because of the fact that I had woken up earlier on to raid the kitchens for some food down in the basement that I managed to escape.

My family wasn't so lucky.

I watched as they dragged my parents and siblings out from their beds and the house, my parents' wands in their possession and my father into beaten and bound into submission. My brother fiercely tried to defend himself, but was overpowered almost too easily. It is no surprise; after all, what chance does an eight year old have against full grown men? When he received that blow, I had thought that they had killed him on the spot.

Oh how I wished that was the case.

The mob had dragged them all to the front of the house and had tied my parents and sister all together on a post set atop a pyre. Then, with my brother watching through teary eyes as he struggled impotently at the hands of his captors, they lit the pyre.

I could not watch any more. With tears in my eyes and only my wand in hand, I ran through the basement passageway out into the wilderness.

I learnt later on that after the screams of my parents and sister had died down, they had broken my brother's legs before setting him on fire as well. As I heard that the same villagers had laughed actually laughed at how my brother tried to run on broken legs before they put him on fire, I nearly lost control.

I will avenge my family. I vow to build a grand castle on the site where my home once stood before those Muggles burnt it down, and I will take pleasure in wiping out the village of Muggles one person at a time as I take possession of the land.

Harry read on about Salazar's initial guilt of having run away and shame of not being able to protect his family melt away, morphing into a burning desire to avenge them. Salazar had then travelled down south, seeking refuge in his father's older brother's house. While Salazar had been born in Grantabrycge (wherever the hell that was), which was the Slytherin family seat, his father had decided to take the family up north to a modest sized home near a village. Harry wasn't sure about where they had gone when this had occurred. For some reason, there were no names mentioned in the journal. All locations and people were just referred to by relation. Harry wondered at that.

Salazar had grown up with his uncle and cousins. At sixteen, Salazar was sent to Greece for his higher studies where after finishing with his schooling there, Salazar went travelling, learning new spells and experiencing new cultures. He had also honed his natural cunning while abroad into acquiring wealth. By the time Salazar was twenty-five, which was where Harry had stopped reading for now, he had swindled, conned, blackmailed and tricked his way into becoming quite well off. Salazar was in other words, quite a successful con artist. And he was proud of it

Harry felt that Salazar had full right to be proud of himself and what he had achieved. All of his victims had been kings, queens, nobles and other influential people of different countries. And none of them had suspected that they had been taken in by the same man. In some cases, they had no idea that they had been swindled at all!

Harry couldn't wait to continue and find out more about Salazar Slytherin's life. But right now he needed to get back to bed. Getting up from the impromptu seat he had made with the mound of money lying in the vault, Harry headed towards the passageway into the antechamber.

Donning his invisibility cloak once he had come out into the Great Hall, Harry used his father's map to guide himself back to the common room. Although, he was slowly beginning to consider using his cloak whenever he was alone whether it was before or after curfew, for that way, the non living yet still sentient components of the castle did not notice him.

When he was with friends or in a crowd, things were normal. However, when he was alone, all the portraits would bow or curtsy with a whispered 'My Lord', the suits of armour would create a major ruckus when saluting and if a ghost was passing by ... well they would just hover there, nod and be on their way. Even the Bloody Baron had taken to nodding at Harry with respect.

Frankly, ghosts aside, the treatment was getting a bit ridiculous.

Of course, revealing himself as the current Lord Slytherin had its perks. Peeves now gave Harry a lot of respect. True the poltergeist used the same oily tones when addressing Harry that he used when speaking to Dumbledore, but the spirit generally stayed out of Harry's way.

Not only that, but the moving staircases would now move in such a way to ensure that Harry gets to his destination in as little time as possible. Harry was sure that the castle had even created a door and an entire passageway once when he was getting late to Defence.

Harry stopped in front of the Fat Lady and uncovered the hood of his cloak. 'Pssst,'

At once the guardian to the common room woke up and seeing him, said softly, 'Yes, Lord Slytherin?'

'Is Hermione Granger asleep inside?' he whispered back. He had noticed her dot in the common room in the map and couldn't tell if she was asleep or studying.

'She's asleep, my lord,' replied the portrait after a moment.

'Good,' Harry whispered. 'Swing forward slowly a bit then, don't open all the way. We don't want to wake her.'

Slipping through the crack, he spied his friend slumped over her homework, lightly snoring with drool slowly soaking the parchment. Harry started tiptoeing through the room before he smacked his forehead, and drawing his wand, cast a silencing charm on his shoes.

Once that was done, he walked as fast as he could to the stairs and was out of sight just as he heard Hermione wake up with a start.

Just as he was about to turn in for the night, Kreacher popped in silently.

The only indication Harry gave of his surprise was a slight inhalation of breath. Quietly casting a silencing spell around the curtains, he turned to the elf.

Despite the bags under the elf's eyes and the general dishevelled air he was giving off, the expression on his face was one of accomplishment.

'So, is it done then?' Harry asked eagerly.

'Yes master,' the elf croaked tiredly. 'Kreacher is finding and putting nasty filthy thief into dungeons in Black Castle.'

'Good,' said Harry. 'I'll pay him a little visit tomorrow. You did a good job Kreacher. I am pleased. Get some rest now. You need it.'

'Thank you, master.' The elf gave a deep bow and popped out.

The next day was a Sunday. Harry spent the day at the school as he normally would, seeing to his various duties and mucking about with his mates when he had the free time. Once dinner was done with and the students had turned in for the night, Harry snuck back into the Chamber with his Firebolt.

Reaching the balcony, he flew down to the remains of the cottage and Disapparated from there.

He immediately reappeared in front of the imposing Black Castle. It wasn't as large as Hogwarts, or Windsor Castle, but it was slightly bigger than the pictures of Eilean Donan Castle that Harry had seen. Made of magically enhanced black granite, Black Castle was placed on a smaller island connected to the larger Black Isle via a footbridge that reached halfway towards the castle. A drawbridge that lowered itself when Harry approached completed the bridge.

Entering, Harry immediately proceeded to the dungeons. The contractors that he had hired to take care of renovations to the interior of the castle had done a good job from what he could see. The exterior didn't need any repairs due to the nature of the material used to build the castle.

Leaving the opulent rooms, Harry descended down towards the dungeons.

Opening the door of the dungeons, he sauntered towards Mundungus's cell. The stench of tobacco and spirits was rather overpowering in the closed quarters.

An Air Freshening Charm did away with most of the stench as Harry approached Mundungus who started stirring at the sounds of approaching footsteps.

Mundungus Fletcher was not having a good couple of days. It had all started when Harry Potter had found him selling stuff from Sirius's old house in Hogsmeade. The way the younger wizard had accosted him was frightening. Since even full grown wizards were normally not used to fighting dirty, Mundungus normally wouldn't have had a problem brushing Harry off seeing as he was a sixteen year old schoolboy. However, he had felt the magical aura coming from the lad when the boy had realised what Mundungus had been selling. What was worse was the maniacal glint he had seen in those killing curse green eyes. Mundungus had once seen Bellatrix LeStrange when he was being led to his cell in Azkaban many years ago when he was serving a short term on the prison. That was one of the witch's more saner moments, and he had caught her eyes. He would never forget that glint that he had seen in those eyes, and looking into the Potter boy's eyes only served to remind him of that.

As soon as he found an opening, he had scarpered as fast as he could, he did not want to find out what the boy would do to him. The burn in his jaw was painful enough, and that was with undirected magic.

The next few days were spent in hiding. He daren't go out in public, magical or Muggle beyond buying himself some rations. He knew that Dumbledore would have been informed almost immediately, and would find him as soon as possible. Hell, he was expecting a full blown Auror search as well. He hoped that Dumbledore never sent Mad-Eye on his trail. He had a good dose of respect and a greater dose of fear for the retired Auror.

He had only stepped out of his heavily warded hovel a few days later, thinking that the coast was clear. He felt that if he sold the items he had pilfered from Sirius's house as soon as possible, he might be able to deny having them. While he did not like stealing from the dead, or from the man's godson, a man still had to make a living. Besides, the boy was rich; a few trinkets wouldn't matter to him. He would just have to ensure that he never saw or met the boy ever again.

Just as he had lined up a potential client to sell everything, which was yesterday, things had gone pear shaped.

As he was reaching his hideout, he heard the recognisable crack of Apparation. Since he was in a back alley in Muggle London, he

knew that it could probably be trouble. Perhaps an Auror had managed to track him down. Perhaps it was Mad-Eye Moody!

Acting on that sudden fear, he quickly turned around drawing his wand as fast as possible. However, before he could do much, he felt his leg being grabbed and he felt the squeezing sensation of Apparation as his unknown assailant magically dragged him from London. Depositing him in the cell that he now found himself in and leaving while he was still disoriented.

Mundungus had spent the whole of today looking for a way to get out of the dank and dismal cell. While he had a window, any and all sunlight seemed to stop a few inches into the dungeon he found himself in. The place was so reminiscent of Azkaban, that he half expected a Dementor to come visiting.

So when he heard the creak of the door opening and closing, he readied himself behind the door, waiting for his captor to come in. He would ambush the person, and get the hell out of there! He might even leave his captor inside the cell in revenge, so that his jailer could see how it felt to sit in a cell all day without food or water. Then he would run like hell, and as soon as he got out of the anti-portkey wards that he had sensed around the place, he would portkey out of there!

Harry sensed the incoming spell as soon as he opened the door and stepped through. Using his recently ritually enhanced speed and reflexes, Harry sidestepped the stunning spell with ease, turning to the corner just inside the door and snapping of a quick overpowered and silent Disarming Charm at the crook lying in wait there in one fluid motion, sending Mundungus crashing into the wall behind him before he could do more than gape. It was only because he was so close to the wall that the man was still conscious, if still disoriented.

Easily catching Mundungus's wand, Harry put it in his pocket. Another flick of his wand had Mundungus flying to the ceiling of the cell, the wall on Harry's right and finally the wall opposite the door before the thief was released to come crashing to the floor, a moaning heap.

With a silent Levicorpus sent his way, the thief soon found himself hanging upside down and staring in surprise at his captor.

'Blimey, it's you 'Arry!' said the thief in relief, it was hard to tell who it was in the dim light, but from the green eyes glowing back at him, and the profile, he could tell that it was Harry Potter. 'You come to rescue me, 'ave you? Sorry I attacked you an' all, but I thought you was the one 'o nabbed me! Let me down now so we can get the 'ell outta here.'

Because Mundungus could not see Harry's face clearly, he missed the cold smile on the younger wizard's face.

'Now why would I do that,' Harry's cold and sinister sounding voice clearly registered with the thief though.

'After all, I just spent quite a lot of time having you tracked down and brought here in the first place.'

Mundungus had mixed feelings about this revelation. Initially, he had come to the conclusion that it was a rich pure blood he had crossed who had him captured. He was even expecting Lucius Malfoy to come through the door, judging by the dark and menacing nature of the dungeon he was in. However he dismissed that notion. Lucius Malfoy was in prison and besides, if it was a Death Eater who had captured him, he knew he wouldn't find his wand and backup wand on his person. So he was quite confident that he would be able to overpower his captor. However, Harry Potter was another matter. The boy was clearly powerful. And damn fast too!

'Now I'm going to be a nice person and ask you politely,' Harry began pleasantly. 'Where is my stuff?' He inflected steel into his voice as he asked the question.

'I dunno what you're talking about,' said Mundungus nervously.

'I see we have a bad memory, do we? Well I know just the remedy for that,' having said that, Harry released Mundungus roughly with a silent Liberacorpus.

Sajjeta thought Harry, using a spell that he had learnt from Slytherin's journals. He was rewarded by a burst of lightning funnelling down the shaft of his wand and springing out from the tip to strike the groaning wizard.

Mundungus's body jerked and twitched as it was assaulted with magical lightning that overloaded his nerves. He lasted a whole ten seconds before he was screaming his head off.

When the spell was finally lifted, all Mundungus could do was groan as smoke rose from his body. Harry spent a few moments reflecting on the spells that Slytherin had used. The spells should have been easy to find seeing as they were written in their original script which was so far Latin based. However, either Salazar had a bad handwriting or he was really good at hiding things since the foreign words of the incantation were well hidden.

The acrid smell of burning clothes brought an end to that line of thought as Harry focused on his task. 'Well, do we remember now?' he asked as he dangled Mundungus up by his ankle again. 'No? Well, then a few more doses should do.' With that Harry dropped Mundungus to the floor and shocked him multiple times, causing blue light to reflect off the black surface of the dungeon walls as the criminal screamed and writhed on the floor.

'I-I sold them all! They are all gone, and I don't know who to!' babbled Mundungus as he was hoisted by his ankle again. He hoped that he had put enough of conviction into his voice. Perhaps the boy would let him go on hearing this. Powerful he may be, but he still was a boy.

Unfortunately, his hopes were dashed.

Harry tsked and said, 'You know, Fletcher, I really hate liars. So I am going to have to punish you.' He released the thief causing him to fall to the floor for a third time. 'I think a few days here without any food and a little amount of water should help that attitude of yours.' He turned around and started for the door.

Immediately Mundungus acted on desperate instinct, ignoring the pain, he reached into his robes for his backup wand and pointed it at Harry, sending two stunning spells at Harry's back: One dead centre and the other to the left.

He soon received the shock of his life. The first spell wasn't even halfway across the room when, with an eerie precognition, the teen spun around, and sent off a quick and powerful expelliarmus, and almost instantaneously raised a shield absorbing Mundungus's

second stunner as the first one sailed by harmlessly impacting on the wall outside the door.

Harry approached Mundungus's body as he groaned with the latest impact he had with the cold stone floor, the thief's backup wand in his hand. 'Now that was naughty of you Mundungus. Hexing your host like that behind his back in his own dungeon ...' He tsked again mockingly.

'I guess we will have to teach you some proper manners as well.' With that, Harry flicked his wand, causing all the clothes on Mundungus's body and the portkeys he had secreted on his person to vanish, leaving him starkers.

'There we go! Now isn't that lovely?' Harry said in a sarcastic tone. Spotting the gleaming chains, he swished his wand again, manacling his prisoner to the wall.

'There! That should give you the full prisoner experience,' said Harry cruelly. 'Well, I'll see you in a few days!'

'You can't keep me here for long!' said Mundungus desperately. 'Dumbledore will find me!'

'Dumbledore?' laughed Harry derisively. 'Ha, as if! Nobody will find you here Mundungus. You see, the complaint I had made to the Ministry never saw its way to the Auror department thanks to Dumbledore. Besides you are a small time crook. "Small fry" as they say. Nobody will bother searching for you and nobody will suspect that you are here!' he smiled pleasantly at Mundungus, looking very much like a pleased schoolboy. 'Well, I gotta go! I have classes tomorrow, you know ... and McGonagall isn't a Monday person. Bye Dung!' and he practically skipped out of the door.

Once outside, Harry instructed Kreacher to first place an ever-filling jug of water next to the prisoner and then prepare a hot and tasty meal tomorrow evening and place that under a warming charm just outside the dungeon door so that the smell would waft inside, increasing Mundungus's suffering. Kreacher was to repeat the same thing for the next few days, turning the door transparent after an hour or so, so that the thief could watch Kreacher eat the food till Harry got back.

Harry was sure that the thief would be rather willing to talk in five days. While he could have just ripped the location of the pilfered items from the thief's mind, he wanted to do it this way. He really had no set rationale for why though.

Smirking victoriously, Harry Apparated back at Hogwarts and made his way to bed.

A big thank you to Miss Lalla for her help in making this a better chapter!

Read and review!

Right, before you read this chapter, I should mention that I have bumped the rating of the story to M. That would be because of an implied sex scene in this story. I like to err on the side of caution here. It also touches on the subject of, ahem, let's call it "women of the profession" or "meretrices " ("prostitute" is such an ugly word). I don't really know how much it may offend a person, different people react to different things after all, so I thought I'd give fair warning and change the rating.

Mundungus Fletcher stirred weakly at the sudden sound of a door opening. From the light entering the small window of his cell he could tell that fourteen days had passed since he had been imprisoned. Well, fifteen if you count the one day that he had spent in the cell before Harry had visited him. Fourteen days without food or clothes, chained to a wall while a cold breeze blew through the opening, playing across his bare back, making him miserable. While there was a moderate heating charm put on the cell preventing him from freezing to death, it wasn't enough to keep the cold at bay. As a result of this, he barely had any sleep. What little rest he had managed was primarily from passing out due to exhaustion.

And if depriving him of food, sleep and warmth wasn't enough, the sadistic boy just had to instruct that blasted elf to place dishes of hot steaming food right outside his door. At first, Mundungus had laughed at this. He had spent two months in Azkaban. A little cold wasn't going to make him crack, even if the boy planned on withholding food! The cell he was in was pretty luxurious compared to his cell at Azkaban (there weren't any Dementors for one) and he had gone through weeks without a decent meal. Mundungus was sure that all he would have to do would be to lounge in the cell for a few days and when the boy saw that he wasn't going to be cowed, he, Mundungus would be released. After that, he was going to show that brat who was boss.

But in a few days, with no indication of the boy returning, he felt his confidence melt away. Sure the cell was more hygienic and he had clean water to drink, but at the same time he did not have any robes whatsoever. At least in Azkaban, the prisoners were given robes to wear that kept them warm. And the atmosphere was such that one tended to lose one's appetite, so going without food wasn't that much of a torture. However here, there was a constant reminder, as the redolence of the food would waft through the door like an invisible Dementor. And just like a Dementor, the aroma would

attack his mind and body. Forcing his mind to conjure up images of delicious meals he had eaten in the past while his mouth would start salivating and his stomach would start to growl in protest.

Mundungus could almost picture the fragrance emanating from the plate ... wafting through the grate in the door and slithering up into his nose like an ephemeral snake ... slowly driving him mad with visions of heaping plates of the most succulent pieces of chicken, platters of juicy steaks and tureens of hot soup of many different exotic flavours.

On top of that, the elf would also proceed to show Mundungus the food. While making him smell the foodstuffs had been cruel enough, at least Mundungus could take solace in the possibility that surely the food wasn't actually there, and his fantasies were just in his head. However, the sight only served to bring out the images his mind was conjuring and solidify them in reality. Further increasing the gnawing hunger he was feeling. And to top it all, the elf would actually ingest the food in front of him!

The loneliness and solitude wasn't helping matters either. In Azkaban he at least had the howls and wails of his fellow inmates to ground him in reality. Here all he could hear was the chains as they clinked and rattled as his body shook in an effort to stay warm, and his breath. All other sounds were completely muted.

So it was a completely beaten and broken man, devoid of rest, starving and driven nearly insane with the mental torture, who looked up as his captor entered the cell. He didn't even have the strength to do anything more than weakly sit up and bring his knees up to his chin in an effort of preserving his modesty as he looked into the luminous green eyes of his gaoler.

'Well, well, well,' mocked Harry as he stepped through the door, twirling his wand. He was careful to stay out of his prisoner's reach lest the criminal found a hidden well of strength somewhere and made a bid for freedom.

When Mundungus only stirred a little bit, Harry smiled vindictively. 'Looks like we have learnt our manners,' he said as he brought an apple out from a pocket and bit into it.

'Are we hungry?' he asked in fake concern when Mundungus whimpered longingly, looking at the fruit in Harry's hand. 'I guess you would be ... it has been what, four days? Oh wait,' he slapped his head melodramatically, 'It's actually two weeks! Sorry, I forgot. But then again, I have been spending those past fourteen days having three square meals each day ... those Hogwarts house-elves ... they really know how to cook! Why my mates and I enjoyed the feast they had set up for us after Gryffindor won the first Quidditch match of the year against Slytherin! And what a feast it was...' Harry rambled on for a while, describing in minute detail what he had and how it had tasted.

Harry smiled cruelly as he noticed the look of longing on Mundungus's face. Now that he knew that he had the man, he said softly, 'You desperately want to eat, don't you?' Seeing him nod, Harry continued, 'Just tell me where my stuff is and you'll get your food.' He made a silent gesture to Kreacher who put a cloche covered plate in front of the starving man, just out of his reach along with a warm looking blanket.

'Alright,' moaned the man. His throat was not as parched because he had water to drink. Harry paid attention as the man described the place where he had hidden away the goods.

'What wards have you put there, Dung?' He said emotionlessly, 'I know that you would have a few security measures put up there ... don't lie to me now ... or I will make life hell for you.' To emphasise his point, he toed the plate away from Mundungus as he took another bite from the apple.

The criminal looked at Harry for a second, then at the food just out of reach. Finally sagging in defeat, he rattled off the wards in a broken voice. Harry turned to Kreacher, 'Can you take care of those wards, Kreacher?' The wards were pretty basic and Harry felt that they would not stand up to house-elf magic. Kreacher just nodded once and with a POP disappeared, returning a few moments later with a large bulging sack.

Harry looked through all the valuables within the sack. 'Is this everything Kreacher?' he asked the elf.

'Yes, master,' said the elf after a pause. 'Only, Kreacher has not found master's Order of Merlin and cufflinks and tiepin. Those are

being in the family for generations, sneaky thief has sold it!' the elf shouted at the starving man.

'Relax, Kreacher,' said Harry authoritatively. Just then, he spotted a locket.

'Hang on, this looks familiar,' he picked the locket up to examine in the light. And it certainly was, for embedded into the pendant were a bunch of emeralds to make Slytherin's Mark. It was the same locket he had seen around Merope's neck in that memory. How had it ended up in Grimmauld Place?

'It's Slytherin's locket!' Harry breathed.

'Wha,' it is? I'm gonna kill tha' old tosser! He was ripping me orf he was!' Mundungus had clearly heard him as evidenced by the nattering the old crook was doing. The bit of information had awakened some of his spirit.

'Oh shut up, you arsehole!' Harry said with uncharacteristic venom. Suddenly he felt very angry at Mundungus's plans. The twat really was quite selfish! Suddenly a cruel idea came to his mind as, unnoticed by him, the locket seemed to get slightly cold.

'Kreacher, I want you to put this in the secure display cabinet which only I, or one of the elves, can access in the drawing room up in the castle.' Harry said as he handed the locket to Kreacher, still looking at Mundungus. As a consequence, he did not notice the elf becoming tense as he saw the locket in Harry's hand or saw the Kreacher's body visibly deflate in relief as Harry handed the locket back to him. Harry had initially thought of wearing it, but decided against it. Even if the locket did not look that girly, the aura it was emitting was quite unsettling.

'Yes, master,' said Kreacher. He did a better job of hiding the relief in his voice.

'Also, put all the valuables in Grimmauld Place in storage. Anything and everything that isn't bolted down is to be kept in the family wing or better yet, here. I don't trust the Order anymore. Move the furniture as well. They can bloody well sit on the floor when they have their stupid meetings for all I care. Get help from the others if you must, but I want it done and fast!'

'At once, master.' With these words, Kreacher disappeared with the recovered loot.

'Now,' he turned to Mundungus. While he wasn't as angry anymore, he still was seething a bit at the gall of his captive. 'I suppose you have fulfilled your end of the bargain, so here you go.' With that, he toed the cloche towards the starving man who attacked the food, not giving a fig that the steak within was practically charcoal.

Once Mundungus was done, Harry spoke up. 'Well, since I have my stuff back, I guess I should let you go.' He waited for the hopeful expression on the man's face to build up before continuing, 'However, you didn't return everything. So I guess we will have to work something out.' Harry ignored the man's stuttering offer of the name of the person he had sold the stolen items to as he continued brightly, 'Fortunately I have an idea.' And before Mundungus's eyes, Harry took out the criminal's primary wand, and snapped it in half followed by his backup wand. Mundungus looked at the remains of his wands. His wands were the only things that he had to remember his mother by as she had bought his primary wand for him before his first year in Hogwarts in a happier time, before his father had gambled the money away. His backup wand was even more precious to him as it was actually his mother's.

'Hurts, doesn't it?' Harry said softly, as he noticed the anguish on the crook's face as Mundungus strained against the chains binding him. 'Well now you know how I felt when you took my stuff. That was for the Order of Merlin, by the way. This,' he pointed his wand at the pile of clothes that Mundungus only recognised now as his clothes, 'is for the cufflinks and tiepin.' And with a flick of his wand, Harry burnt the garments, reducing them to ash.

Calling Kreacher back again, Harry turned to the elf where he bent down to whisper into the elf's ear. The elf nodded and with a malicious smile, disappeared, reappearing with a piece of parchment and a quill and still smiling malevolently as he looked at Mundungus. Scribbling a line on it, Harry said loudly, 'Kreacher, take our guest to the destination that we have agreed upon.'

'I didn' 'gree 'pon no destination,' said the thief. A slight amount of resentment and hate still coloured his voice as he looked at the boy who he had stolen from.

'But Kreacher and I did,' said Harry viciously as he stuffed the note in Mundungus's hand.

Mundungus didn't get much of an opportunity to answer as the house-elf threw the blanket over his body and Disapparated him from his home of the last two weeks.

Once the familiar squeezing sensation faded, Mundungus's weakened form fell to the ground. The first thing that he registered was the huge amount of snow that his face and body was currently embedded in. The second thing was the cold that was seeping into his body, despite the warming charms on the blanket. Looking up, he was just in time to see the elf disappear, a vicious smirk on the creature's face. Mundungus then observed his surroundings and, as he realised where he was, let out a howl of anguish. All around him, as far as he could see, was nothing but snowy tundra. The wind blew rather harshly as there were very few trees growing. He guessed that the nearest human habitation was miles away.

Hearing the crinkle of parchment as he clutched the blanket tighter to himself, he brought the note Harry had stuffed in his hand. Opening it, he read the one sentence written on it in a hurried and carelessly neat scrawl.

And this is for stealing from me in the first place.

With a groan, the boy rolled over, his naked body soaked in sweat and a look of post-orgasmic bliss on his face as he gazed out into the cold November night, a vacant expression on his face. He could just about make out the outline of the nearly thousand-year-old castle perched upon a hilltop that was the main structure that brought many a tourist to the city he was in.

His breathing now somewhat in control, he tore his eyes from the window and turned to look at his partner, a gorgeous specimen of a woman, just as naked as he was, with a smile on his face, as he breathed out 'That was great.' And he meant every word, since it had been positively ages since he had last done it with someone. Things at school were pretty hectic, and he really felt the need to cut loose ... which is why he had snuck out.

His partner, however, wasn't sharing the happiness he was feeling. He had eventually picked up on it for he asked, 'What's wrong?'

'Hm? Oh, yeah, it was great,' said the girl he had managed to snag for the night.

'Oh,' he had caught the insincerity in her voice and wasn't too sure what to do with it.

'Yes, now if you don't mind, I am going to turn in,' saying this, she turned over, her back to him, as if to prove her point.

'Are you sure everything's all right?'

'What? Oh no, everything is fine, you were great! Superb...' the woman, Jenny or something, said almost dismissively as she snuggled into her pillow.

While the bloke (James, she thought his name was) was nice enough to look at, he was, in her humble opinion, like a Chevrolet Sports car: Nice to look at, but all muscle with little to no finesse. All in all, not really a great experience. Sure he had the stamina, and was rather forceful, but he couldn't bring her to satisfaction. She suspected that he might be inexperienced. Hopefully she had let him think that he was great. She did not intend on pursuing this relationship come next morning.

Evidently she wasn't fully successful as the body next to her stiffened before he said slightly coldly, 'Well, I've got to go too ... Got a lot to do next morning.'

She winced at the cold tone and change in mood. She really hated hurting his feelings. He was a nice enough bloke, rather kind and courteous towards her, but she couldn't help how she felt.

Hoping to salvage the situation, and perhaps make him feel that it was really her who was tired, she said as sleepily as she could manage, 'Well, call me sometime,' as she watched him leave, she was sure she saw his greyish blue eyes flash an intense green as his hair seemed to darken for a second to black from the dark brown it originally was. Thinking it as a trick of the light she closed her eyes and mumbled a 'Goodbye' as he left her bedroom. She was asleep by the time he had closed the door.

Harry seethed silently as he zipped up his jacket and put his hands in his pockets as he left the house and battled the wind as he walked down the road. The neighbourhood was similar to the one he had grown up in, only it was rather windy in November up here in Edinburgh unlike down south in Surrey.

He barely noticed the nearly horizontal rain even though the tiny droplets of water propelled by the wind stung his face. He was currently a mess of emotions upon having found out what was inside that pretty little head of dirty blonde hair that belonged to the owner of the house he had left. His first reaction was anger, but in the cold wind, that blew away to be replaced with a combination of insecurity and uncertainty. Did the girls he had gone with before feel the same? Was it only her? Or was something wrong with him?

He admitted that he was a bit hesitant his first time, but he thought that he had improved since then as he gained confidence. However, all that was now dashed once he had gone through that blonde's thoughts.

Harry kicked at a small pebble moodily, and grunted in minor anger as a gust of wind blew the stone sideways into the street, out of his way. Women! How did they expect to have a great night with him if they did not tell him what to do and how to do it? It wasn't as if he was born with the ability to please a woman!

It was just like Snape's Occlumency lessons all over again. Harry was expected to know what to do without being told how to do it and then judged harshly when he failed to deliver. The boy stopped that line of thought as fast as he could. Comparing sex with a girl to Snape of all things was just wrong! Harry nearly got violently sick at that.

Harry pondered on this problem. He really liked sex (which sixteen year old boy didn't?) and he knew beyond a doubt that he was soon going to be stuck with one girl for the rest of his life (here he shuddered again - any thought involving the words "the rest of his life" was something that gave him the willies every time). At any rate, if he wanted more, he would have to find a way to be really good at it. His newly resurrected competitiveness demanded it at the least.

Not to mention Daphne's heated instructions of making her scream her first night.

But where was he supposed to find the training? It wasn't as if he could read it off a book! While he was aware of the existence of books written on sex, there was no way he could practise that because a) he was sure that the reality was different from what was written and b) what he had read so far involved very outlandish positions that he was sure was only practised in a more long term relationship. Not to mention c) he didn't think referring to a book in the middle of thrusting in and out helped the mood any.

What he needed was experience. From someone who was a professional...

Harry stopped at this line of thought as an idea came to his mind. Something that he felt would not only solve his problem, but also felt great to his hormone driven mind. With half a smile on his face, he checked the time on his watch. It was still early enough, so he eagerly Apparated to a side alley in Princess Street, where he had first Apparated to earlier.

Heading over to a bus stop he had noticed with a large copy of a map of the city pasted inside, he looked for the location of the University of Edinburgh. Finding it, he concentrated on the location and Apparated there. He had a hunch that the university would have a larger computer cluster if Smeltings (if any of Dudley's stories were true) had one. While it was true that he could find an all-night internet cafe, he really did not want to search for one. Not when he knew of a place that could suit his needs.

Entering, it was a simple matter of picking the username and password out of a passing sleep deprived student's head and he was logged into the nearest terminal.

It took a lot of trial and error, and involved a lot of patience in Harry's part as he slowly and steadily found on the keyboard, and typed out the letters of keywords into the search engine (thankfully the layout of the keyboard hadn't changed that much since he had last used it briefly so many years ago), but he eventually managed to get the information he was looking for.

Exiting the University grounds, he went to the nearest phone box and dialled the number he had jotted down.

The next evening he was walking into the lobby of a pricey hotel a bit away from the castle, approaching a good looking and well dressed woman rather nervously. Introducing himself with the fake name he had given the escort service he had called, Harry managed to relax a bit as he and his escort, Victoria, ate a delicious dinner in one of the hotel's restaurants. As dessert approached, his nervousness increased as he cleared his throat and said, 'I, uh, have a business proposition for you.'

Seeing that he had her attention, he continued, 'See I have this girlfriend ... and we've never ... you know, done "it" before ... now I-I sort of want our first time to be special ... so I was wondering if you could help me with that?' he finished nervously, internally wincing at the lame story he had come up with at the last moment. Planning Potter, Planning! He mentally berated himself as he put on a show of confidence he did not feel.

Victoria looked at him from across the table an unreadable look on her face as she looked at the nervous young man across him. This certainly is new, she thought.

'And what exactly is your idea on me helping you, Harvey?' she said. Personally, in her opinion, the tall blonde across from her with those stunning green eyes looked more like a Harry to her, not that she would mention that.

'Well, I was thinking that maybe you could, you know, give me some pointers or something? Perhaps show me a thing or two? I thought that perhaps we could have a few sessions every weekend...' he trailed off nervously.

'What, do you think I'm running, a fucking night school?' snorted Victoria after a few moments of processing the request. This was the first time she was actually approached with such an offer, and she really did not know how she felt about that.

Her client blushed at that and started to stammer out an apology when she said abruptly, 'Sure, why not?' effectively shutting him up.

'Y-you mean that you'll do it?' he said with hope and relief.

'Yeah,' she shrugged. 'It could be fun; you weren't what I was expecting to be honest. Normally, I have middle-aged men as my clientele. The fact that you are young, a virgin, and not to mention good looking are all plus points in my opinion. Though, I will have to ask you to provide some identification. You don't really look that old, and I don't fancy being arrested for statutory rape.'

Harry was prepared for this, so, looking into her eyes, he gave his escort a mental nudge convincing her that she had seen a driver's licence as he slipped a perfectly blank piece of paper towards her.

'Wright, eh?' she said as she examined the sheet in front of her. 'Ha! I knew you were younger than you claimed! You aren't twenty, but eighteen!' she crowed triumphantly.

Harry mentally cursed himself for the small slip up. Thankfully his escort didn't seem to mind as she slid the paper back without comment. 'Right, I think we can do this. I will charge you my standard fare, a hundred quid per night – after all, I'm not your average hooker, but an escort. I estimate that the "course",' here she giggled a bit at the word, 'will take five weeks, so that's ten nights. Of course, it could go on a bit longer or shorter depending on your learning ability, if it takes less time than anticipated, then you save on the cash, which you will pay me after each of our sessions. Of course the fare does not include the premises or any other expenses.'

Harry considered that for a moment before saying, 'Deal.' He extended his hand which Victoria shook.

'I don't really know what your real reason is for wanting lessons, and I really don't care,' she added upon seeing him about to open his mouth. 'But if it is true, then your girlfriend must be one lucky girl ... though I don't know if she will feel that way if she ever finds out ... shall we?' she said as she finished the last of her chocolate mousse.

'Certainly.'

After paying the bill, the two of them went up to a room. 'You were prepared,' said Victoria as she saw him pass the concierge and approach the bank of lifts confidently.

Harry just smiled at her winningly as he (unnecessarily in her opinion) held the automatic lift doors open for her as he gestured her in.

Once they were safely ensconced in their room, the escort-turned-tutor looked at her new pupil of sorts after examining the room and said, 'Strip. I want to have a good look at what I am going to be working with.'

She showed a little of her surprise and admiration at his near-instant compliance and apparent lack of modesty as he removed his clothes confidently, neatly stepping out of his low-waist designer jeans after having discarded the clearly expensive odd coat and designer shirt with a casual nonchalance. Now there's a man comfortable in his own body, she thought.

And he has a right to be too, she opined as she gazed in awe at his toned chest and lean body. Nobody should be that perfect, was the idle thought in her head as she breathlessly roved her eyes over his flawless skin. Or not as flawless she thought as she saw the almost circular pale scar on his arm. While it was faint, it did add character. She wondered how he had ended up with that.

She couldn't help but quirk her lips in a small smile as she saw the pair of pants he was wearing. 'Cute aeroplanes,' she said as she silently indicated for him to go on.

Harry just shrugged his shoulders as he stepped out of his pants and stood, starkers, in front of her, skilfully hiding any nervousness he felt.

'Nice,' purred the woman as she circled him, looking at him from back to front. 'A good length, uncut too ...' she said as she fondled and stroked him, playing with the foreskin and bringing him to full excitement. 'I approve.'

'Right,' she got down to business as she stepped out of her clothes with a practised ease. 'Let's begin.'

And so started Harry's "education": Victoria gave him an intimate knowledge of the female body. She used her experience to indicate which spots he should touch; when he should do so, and how best to do it, to give the most amount of pleasure.

He didn't realise it then, but what he had done was pretty much silly and unnecessary. After all, the girls his age were just as inexperienced as he was before he had started those sessions. At any rate, a few years later, when Harry was an adult, he would look back on this time with embarrassment, thinking of how stupid he had been as a teenager, and how badly he had overreacted. He would also thank the fates that nothing bad had resulted from his impetuosity.

But that was well into the future. By the end of the sessions, Harry knew all about the finer aspects of the human female's body and how best to bring any woman to moan and writhe with pleasure. This kind of knowledge was pure gold as far as he was concerned. And nobody needed to know about it. This was why he felt little remorse when casting a binding charm on the sleeping Victoria as she slept away the results of his "final exam". He also left three fifty pound notes and a little note thanking her and telling her to enjoy the room as it was paid for as a token of his gratitude as he Apparated to his private valley.

He had progressed quite nicely on other fronts as well. His training, which had originally been set back because of Neville and the girls, had yielded better results. Having others to practise with had helped to increase Harry's rate of progress compared to the rate of progress when he was doing all this by himself during the summer.

Neville, Susan and Hannah were now quite fit due to their exercises, and the rest of the school population had noticed. And their schoolmates certainly appreciated it too, so much so that Neville had just as much attention from the female population as Harry, something that the poor boy wasn't used to. Though he was beginning to get more comfortable with the attention he was receiving, as well as becoming more confident. Hannah and Susan were popular enough before the training, what with Susan being the Minister's niece and Hannah her close friend. Now though, the boys paid more attention to them because of their good looks and toned bodies.

The magical aspect of their training had also made them the most powerful quartet in their year. Neville especially had improved in leaps and bounds till he was almost as powerful as Harry. And while the girls didn't have as much raw power as the boys, they too were a

force to be reckoned with as they had a vicious creativity, coming up with innovative ways to use some otherwise harmless spells in a duel as they used their lower centre of gravity and grace to dance out of the reach of the spells sent their way.

Harry had also progressed to the fifth volume of Salazar's journals, his increased progress was mainly because he had taken to moving the books up to his dorm which he would then read at night before going to sleep and whenever he was free.

Once he had made enough money for himself, Salazar delved deep into magic and its theories, coming up with interesting methods to block and deflect spells. He had also hypothesised a way of being able to actually absorb the magical energy from a curse. His sense of adventure and thirst for more knowledge led him east, to Egypt, one of the premier places to learn about magic in that era. There he learnt of some arcane wards and curses that the priests of the old religion had used to guard the final resting places of their Pharaohs which had been passed down over the generations, their secrets not mattering anymore after the death of their last pharaoh centuries ago. Salazar noted how the once great civilisation was now broken, although the magical society still thrived as it had separated from the Muggles centuries ago when the Christians had first started to abolish the pagan rituals. Harry found himself thinking about what Salazar had imagined of what Magical Britain would have been like if they had separated themselves from the Muggles earlier too, instead of being content with this half-separation.

In his travels in the continent and to Egypt, Salazar Slytherin had heard of a university located in modern-day India called the Nalanda University. Already well-established at that time, the university had a reputation for being the best there is, attracting many scholars from different corners of the world. There Salazar had learnt of many potions which even Harry could tell were the precursors of many of the modern-day potions he had come across. Along with that, Salazar had also learnt of many different healing practices that until then Harry was sure were recent discoveries in the Muggle world.

For example, Harry was sure that the idea of stitches and plastic surgery were recent advances in Muggle medicine and not done in the Magical world. Yet, here was Salazar describing those procedures, as he watched a healer do a nose job on an Indian noblewoman:

I watched with awe along with the other students as the healer constructed a new nose using the skin and flesh of his patient's current nose. Deftly shaping it to the feature the vain woman so desired, and expertly stitching the incisions he had made before too much blood was lost, leaving no scars behind.

The results were impressive. Had I not known about the surgery, I would not have been able to tell that the nose was altered so. I have to admit that the new nose made the woman look much more distinguished.

Harry had learnt later on that most of the procedures that Salazar had described were refined and further improved in the modern Wizarding world. So much so that scars were a rare thing in the magical world. The only exceptions were scars like his which had been caused by serious dark magic.

Salazar had also sought out and learnt from the nomadic men and women who roamed the expansive jungles. They were reputed to know a lot of magic that was native to India. While the university was a good place to learn, it mainly was a mix of the practices brought by different scholars from all over the world, mainly China, Greece and Persia. However, there was little of the indigenous magic being taught there. And that was mainly because of these nomads as they fiercely protected these magics. Salazar had heard story after story of how powerful and feared these nomads were. Naturally he sought them out to find out those secrets.

And he succeeded: Using his cunning and guile, he had somehow, inexplicably, managed to learn some of their secrets. While it was barely scratching the surface, what little he had learnt was pretty impressive.

For one, they knew of some really unique dark magic. They knew how to combine Divination and blood magic to invent some truly horrendous curses that did not directly affect their victim, but affected the victim's life, normally targeting the victim's bloodline in some fashion or the other. For maximum effect, these curses were designed to stay dormant for years, sometimes decades before coming into effect when it would hurt the victim the most.

However, Harry was surprised to note that these people were not evil. While every single one of them was reputed of knowing such dark curses, they had no desire of taking over the world. They were more than happy living alone, occasionally acting as healers, taking care of rare diseases when called upon.

Salazar had also learnt some Occlumency from these nomads. It was mainly because of this magical discipline that they were generally passive.

The one thing that made Indians truly unique was Parseltongue. While other civilisations had their share of Parselmouths, that trait was pretty rare, and thus the magic was not developed. However, in India, the ability was more common. In fact, there was a tribe of those nomads that performed magic exclusively in Parseltongue.

And here came the greatest shock of Harry's life. The ability to be able to speak in the language of the snakes not only was hereditary, but could also be obtained through the use of a ritual.

And Slytherin had managed to get that ritual performed on him. That could only mean that he wasn't born a Parselmouth.

I have become rather fortunate today, Salazar had written. I managed to save one of these nomads from death. I used the life debt owed to me to have the ritual that I have heard of performed on me. From this I will be able to know of the secrets of the snakes, gaining the knowledge of being able to speak to this fascinating animal, much like the legendary Greek wizard, Herpo the Foul.

It is a good thing that he does not know that the life threatening situation he had found himself in was engineered by me. I would not want to be on the wrong side of the curses his kind are known for.

Harry stared at the book for an entire minute. He could not believe that Salazar wasn't born a Parselmouth. Well, there goes a few of my preconceived notions, he thought wryly. Further reading told Harry that Salazar's descendants would need to have that ritual done on them again if they wished to have the ability to perform magic in Parseltongue even though they were capable of speaking in the language.

In other words, only the ability to speak to snakes was hereditary. Harry deflated at this fact. He had hoped that he would be able to at least cast magic in Parseltongue. From what he had read so far, it sounded like a powerful branch of magic.

His hopes went up again when he read the description of the ritual that Salazar had written. According to the founder, the ritual entailed having the venom of a magical snake, which in Salazar's case was a runespoor, injected into the wizard's body with the fang being broken off the snake's mouth but still embedded in the wizard's flesh. The wizard had to then endure the venom for an amount of time which was inversely proportional to how powerful and potent the venom was and dependant on the age and physiology of the wizard. At the same time, the wizard had to kill the snake without casting any spells.

Only after that, when the wizard was near death, would the antidote be administered. If the wizard survived this highly dangerous and risky ritual, they would then move on to the final step. First the fang with which the serpent had bitten the wizard would remain coated in the wizard's blood till all the magical essence of the wizard in the blood was absorbed into the fang and mixing with the now dead snake's magical essence. This was indicated by the forming of a connexion between the wizard and fang. A connexion formed by death, blood, sacrifice and, most importantly, magic.

Harry sat up at this bit of information. The ritual that was described was eerily similar to what had happened to him in his second year. The basilisk was definitely a magical snake, and Harry had been injected with its venom after which he had killed the basilisk almost immediately with a sword. Harry also estimated that it had been a matter of a minute or so before Fawkes had come in to heal him from the effects of the venom. He was pretty sure that he was close to death at that time.

So that meant that all Harry had to do now was to send the basilisk fang he had found earlier to Ollivander with his wand. He was pretty sure that all his "magical essence" was fully absorbed by the fang seeing how he was drawn to the thing. He hadn't been able to go a day without looking and touching that thing at least once. At first he put the cause of his obsession down to the encounter he had survived. Now ... it took on a whole new meaning.

Putting down the book, Harry checked the time. It was the day after his final session with Victoria and it was getting rather late. Making a mental note to write to Ollivander about the possibility of adding a new element to his wand, Harry turned in for the night.

Monday morning was a sombre affair as it carried grave news. After a long battle, Sally-Anne Perks had finally succumbed to the curse on the necklace. After giving the normal spiel of how hard a worker the girl was, and how great a person and how much she would be missed, Dumbledore then told them that some of the fifth, sixth and seventh year classes would be cancelled for the day while the rest of the students had the whole day to themselves. This was done, as Dumbledore claimed, 'in honour of Ms Perks' memory' and also because the Aurors were stepping up investigations as it was now a murder case rather than a case of attempted murder. Naturally seeing as she was a student of the school, the Aurors had decided to interview the inhabitants of the castle they felt would help assist their investigations. Since that list included Professors Flitwick, Snape, and McGonagall as well as Ron and Hermione among other students and teachers, that meant that Harry would have only Potions which was way after lunch.

The opportunity this presented him with was too good to miss. Sneaking out into the grounds wasn't much of a challenge as all he had to do was follow a small number of students out into a surprisingly clear and sleet-free day. From there, he entered the Forbidden Forest where the wards of the castle ended and Disapparated in a whisper.

Reappearing at the entrance to Diagon Alley, Harry activated his necklace and made his way to Ollivanders. He felt the heaviness of the wards as he approached the door and opened it.

'Mr Potter,' Ollivander's soft voice penetrated the silence hanging in the empty shop, preceding the man as he appeared from amongst the dusty shelves. 'Shouldn't you be in school today? I was not aware that the winter holidays had started so early.'

'Classes for the day were cancelled,' said Harry shrugging. 'And since I have been emancipated, I am well within my rights to go wherever I want to in my free time.'

'But forget about that. I have a question for you.' he extracted the basilisk fang from his pocket and placed it on the table. 'I recently came into possession of this basilisk fang, and the most curious thing is that I am rather attracted to it. Now, since I figure that I have connexion to it, and as a basilisk is a magical creature, I figured that a wand could be made from this?' he looked at the old wand-maker questioningly.

'Mr Potter,' the older man began slowly, 'You do know that I cannot sell a person another wand when that person already has an intact wand registered with the Ministry? I'm afraid that what you are asking of me is rather illegal.'

'Oh no, Mr Ollivander,' said Harry laughing lightly. 'You misunderstand me. I did not want a new wand made from this. I was instead hoping that the fang can be used as a core and possibly integrated into my current wand. I checked, and the laws do not forbid that.'

The wand-maker's expression relaxed a bit on hearing this. 'You aren't wrong in that respect,' he said slowly. 'A wand can be modified later on in the user's life. Generally the modifications involve repairs ... what you are suggesting isn't normally done. It isn't unheard of, however.' The man paused for a minute, lost in thought. 'I suppose I can help you. Let me have a look at that fang.'

Pulling on a pair of basilisk hide gloves and placing a pince-nez on his eyes, Ollivander began to examine the fang minutely through the eyepiece, humming to himself. After a few moments, which were spent with Harry looking around the shop, he put the fang down at last.

'Well, I can definitely say that you have a connexion with the fang. If it wasn't for the fact that you haven't died yet from handling this highly poisonous item being enough of an indicator, the fact that I can sense some of your aura and magical essence within the fang is more than enough proof. What I am curious about is how did you manage to form a connexion with a basilisk fang of all things? A basilisk hasn't been seen here in Britain for centuries.'

'Oh it's a long story,' said Harry. 'Basically the gist of it is that in my second year, I was bitten by Salazar Slytherin's thousand-year-old pet basilisk which I had then killed using Godric Gryffindor's sword

which I had extracted from the sorting hat. I only survived that encounter because Fawkes, Dumbledore's phoenix, used his tears to heal my wounds.'

"Salazar Slytherin's thousand-year-old pet basilisk"?' repeated Ollivander blankly as he considered the boy in front of him. 'I presume that the snake was in the fabled Chamber of Secrets?' Seeing Harry nod the man muttered, 'Incredible.'

Shaking himself out of his musing, Ollivander returned to the business at hand. 'Well, this helps matters a bit. The fact that the phoenix whose tail feather forms the core of your wand saved you from the effects of the snake venom may hinder or accelerate the bonding, I cannot tell at this time. Normally the two creatures aren't really enemies, unlike, say, the basilisk and the Acromantula or the hippogriff and griffin. The fact that you have a bond with both the phoenix's feather and the basilisk's fang might help, but the fact that the same phoenix helped your fight against the deadly venom might hinder the bonding...' he trailed off. 'Why don't you show me your wand? I will be able to make a better judgement then.'

Harry reached into his back pocket. Seeing the wand-maker's eyes narrow, the boy suddenly grinned and with a flick of his left hand, he brought his wand out from the holster into his palm which he then presented handle first to Ollivander.

The wand-maker only raised an eyebrow at the teen's antics as he took the wand. Placing the wand next to the fang, he bent down to observe the items on the table through his pince-nez, running his finger back and forth over the frame of the glasses as he did so. After a few moments, he looked back up at Harry, removing his glasses. 'Well, it will take some work, but I think it will be possible. It will take time though.' He warned the teen 'A week or two at the most is my estimation.'

Harry pondered at this for a moment before replying, 'I'll get the wand and fang to you just as the winter holidays start then. That way I won't need the wand as badly as I would need it if I were in school.'

Ollivander nodded, 'That is acceptable. I will have it ready by New Year's at the most. A new wand for a new year! I won't charge you for the modifications as I consider this as a repayment for the debt that I owe you. That and the challenge will be more than enough.'

'Thank you, sir,' Harry inclined his head. 'And thanks again for the gift that you sent me. I truly enjoyed that book, as I had mentioned in my earlier thank-you letter to you, the calligraphy and illustration were only surpassed by the richness and depth of the stories written within.'

'It was my pleasure Mr Potter. It is nice to see a young man such as yourself appreciating the finer things in life. Now be off with you, I have things I need to be doing.'

Harry took his wand and fang and walked out of the door.

'And this is for being a smart arse.' When he heard the sentence, Harry immediately dodged to the left, avoiding the stinging hex sent his way. Laughing at the older man's muttered 'cheeky brat' Harry hurried back to Hogwarts.

Hermione Granger put down her quill and sat back in her chair, rubbing her eyes. Opening them she blearily looked at her half-completed assignment. It was already late at night and this essay and to be at Professor Snape's desk tomorrow! That meant that she had less than fourteen hours to chop off the extra two inches off the essay to make it to the specified six feet (she did not want to test the veracity of his threat that anyone who exceeded the limit would get a zero) and write it properly before handing it in. However, she couldn't bring herself to care much about it. Right now her main concern was not on the schoolwork, her prefect duties or homework. No she had other concerns, and they were too many to count.

First off was Draco Malfoy. She and Ron knew that the slimy git was behind poor Sally-Anne's murder. She shuddered at the memories Sally-Ann brought up. She was there when the poor girl had tripped, dropping the necklace which had come out of its packaging. However, by the time she had recognised the necklace, it was too late as Sally-Anne had already put her hands on the cursed jewellery. What followed was truly horrifying. As soon as her hands, covered in fingerless mittens, had touched the necklace, Sally-Anne rose into the air, her arms outstretched, looking peaceful for a few seconds before she started screaming and thrashing about. Hermione and Ron had done all they could to bring Sally-Anne to Madame Pomfrey as quickly as possible. It was a good thing that Ron had run off and found Hagrid.

At first Hermione had thought that Sally-Anne would pull through this, but it was not meant to be. Upon hearing of her death, Hermione felt even worse. She blamed herself for that. If only she had paid attention and spotted that necklace sooner ... logically speaking, she knew that she need not blame herself, but she couldn't help herself.

What was more, she and Ron knew that Malfoy was behind this. The problem was there was no proof! And without proof, nobody was willing to help. All they had was conjecture. And saying something stupid like 'It's because he hasn't been attending his classes and looks sickly' wasn't going to be received well.

A part of her felt that all their problems would have been solved if they had included Harry in the plot in the first place. Heaven knows how resourceful and observant her friend was. While she was good at research, he was good in field work, capable of making creative leaps in logic. And that was without the resources that he had at his command. That invisibility cloak of his, which she was sure he had bought, or had it bought for him in his first year (because really, no invisibility cloak has lasted for more than fifteen years, so it couldn't be his father's) plus that map the Marauders had made would have made tracking Malfoy a piece of cake.

The problem was that Ron did not see things her way. He argued that Harry should not have to worry about such things. That it was their job, given by Dumbledore himself to ensure that.

So that left them without the map and the cloak. And unlike last time, they could not borrow it without asking Harry first. Not only was his trunk so ridiculously warded that Mad-Eye himself would have called it paranoia, but he kept that cloak of his on his person at all times. And he had placed anti-theft wards on his pockets as well. It was a good thing that the wards did not have that feature that could tell who tried to breach them set into them. That way, she could pretend that it was someone else that had tried to pick his pocket and Ron could pretend that he had tripped on his trunk.

Not that Hermione felt like asking Harry for permission either. He had refused to believe their suspicions regarding Malfoy, and that had hurt. A part of her wanted to prove Malfoy's involvement just to rub it in Harry's face.

And it looked like she was going to be doing it alone for the moment. Ron was no longer talking to her, not after the big fight they had after the first Quidditch match. She honestly couldn't understand his problem. Didn't he see that it was an honest mistake on her part? Then he had to go and latch onto that slag, Lavender Brown. She tried to tell herself that he was perfectly fine to go out with whomever he liked, after all, she hadn't asked him out, nor had he asked her out. But a small part of her couldn't help but feel hurt.

Harry was another thing that was bugging her. Her friend had definitely changed this year. And that was evident from the time he had first met them at the Burrow. At first, she had expected a sullen brooding and even angry-at-the-world Harry. She certainly expected it to be so after that argument the two of them had, where she had reamed him good for wanting to run away from his responsibilities.

But this ... this was completely different. This Harry was upbeat and lively. Not to mention confident and extroverted. While everyone else was content to let things be, she was sure that Harry was only creating a facade, hiding his true feelings behind a mask. She was convinced that it would only be a matter of time before Harry finally burst from keeping his feelings inside him. And she was determined to make him open up lest it become too late and they all wake up one day to find that he had done something drastic and irresponsible like running away.

There were also other questions she had for the boy. Like how did he find the time to manage his Quidditch and House Captain duties, go to class and submit all his homework in record time! While the rest of the sixth-years were struggling to understand the theories explained (herself included), Harry was practically sailing through the class. He was now always the first person to get a new spell, getting perfect results minutes after the teacher had made them begin. And he made casting non-verbal spells look easier than breathing.

In other words, while she was struggling to stay on the top five, he was struggling not to become number one. And he wasn't really putting up much of a fight there. While his story of being a natural left hander and recently reverting back to using his left hand explained the improvement in handwriting and spell casting, Hermione, unlike the teachers did not believe that it was the reason for his rocketing to the number one spot in academics.

What really made her scowl in frustration was that dratted Potions book he was cheating from. She wasn't fooled by his lame excuse of having destroyed the book accidentally even though Professor Slughorn had fallen for it hook, line and sinker. She knew for a fact, beyond a doubt, that he still had that book. However, he had covered his tracks too well for her to catch him. To think that he had the gall to pass off another person's ideas as his own!

She had initially suspected him of possessing similar text books of previous talented students and using that, but had debunked that theory. Surely, he wouldn't have been able to find books in all the subjects! That and she hadn't seen him pouring over the text books of the other subjects like he was doing with the Potions text book.

So Hermione had to grudgingly admit that Harry was naturally talented. This wasn't an easy admission to make, even to herself, but she had to face the truth. Then again, maybe it was just an act? If it was, his results in his N.E.W.T. exams would reveal that truth...

At first she had assumed that he would be shunned or used to complete other people's homework like she was initially used before becoming his friend and still shunned even after becoming his friend, but everyone just seemed to adore him! What was more; they actually took his criticisms and corrections with a grace that was noticeably absent when she did the same.

The only explanation she could come up with was that his fame and popularity protected him from scorn and ridicule.

What was most surprising were the hexes and jinxes she was sure she caught him casting on Filch and Mrs Norris, and that too in front of other students, who predictably, laughed and applauded. The Harry she knew wouldn't be such a ... bully. 'And what proof do you have of that, Hermione?' he had asked her when she had confronted him about it.

'I could cast Prior Incantato on your wand ... that would show which spell you used,' she said triumphantly, recovering from the momentary shock of him openly challenging her.

'True, but as a prefect, you don't really have the authority to take a student's wand and cast such a spell.'

'Then I could ask McGonagall to do it,' she rallied after a pause. She was sure that threatening him with McGonagall would be enough to get him to back down.

'Well, then I just might let slip that a certain someone cast a Confundus charm. I hear that the teachers take a dimmer view to such charms being cast on unsuspecting students that are doing things like flying ... what would happen then? Especially in this atmosphere.' his tone was normal, but his words were more than capable of freezing her in her tracks.

Hermione could not believe that he had blackmailed her in such a way as she stood there looking at his back as he walked away with an eclectic group of their schoolmates and assorted hangers-on. Then again, it wasn't the first time he had done something so underhanded and sneaky. The way he had manipulated Ron into playing the best game of his fledgling school Quidditch career was quite masterful too. Not to mention the way he had used her when manipulating Ron.

Then there was the company he was keeping. Almost half the time Hermione would see him spending time with a different girl, pretending to listen to one while flirting with another. She still had to figure out why he had gone with Daphne Greengrass of all people and what they saw in each other. In fact, Greengrass was the only girl in whose company she saw him regularly.

He had also grown colder towards them. She supposed that they deserved it, what with the way they kept ignoring him and disappearing off to spy on Malfoy. But it was necessary. Malfoy was a threat. She was sure that he had been given the task of assassinating someone within the school. His targets: the headmaster ... or Harry.

Hermione made a promise to herself then. After all this was over, she would sit down with Harry and they would clear the air. Then, when everything was all right, when Malfoy was on his way to Azkaban thanks to her foiling his plot, making Harry realise that she was right all along, and when Harry had finally finished Voldemort off with her help, she would ask him those questions that were really bugging her ever since she had met him.

Hermione really hated unsolved puzzles, and Harry Potter was the biggest unsolved puzzle she had ever seen. Once all this was over, she planned on finding out everything, all about his life before Hogwarts (a subject she had immediately noticed that he would avoid at all costs) and what he was up to this year. She already had Ron figured out, it was Harry who fascinated her. Getting secrets from him was like pulling teeth.

She didn't stop to think that there were secrets that she had kept from Harry, or that Harry had a right to his secrets just like everyone else.

My thanks to Miss Lalla for her help here.

On another note, a certain word was spelt in a certain way in this chapter because you inspired it, Elvendork Nigellus! I think you know what it is.

Chp19